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Captain Volcano;

OR,

The Man of the Red Revolvers.

A Story of Life Against Life for a Big Stake.

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AUTHOR OF "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "BRONZE JACK," "OVERLAND KIT," "JOE PHENIX," "THE WOLF DEMON," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FANDANGO.

AWAY down on the southern coast of California, close to the Mexican line, lies the town of San Diego, sleeping lazily at the head of the little bay which is known as San Diego harbor.

One of the oldest towns on the coast is San Diego, founded years and years ago by the holy mission priests, who, marching northward from the Mexican capital, marked their way by

making the wilderness bloom like a rose garden—one of the oldest and one of the dullest of the Californian coast towns, for your native Californian is a true son of a tropical clime, and the ancient city, until these later years, has mainly been peopled by natives to the soil.

San Diego slept in the days of the old priests; San Diego is barely awake even now; but, there is one period in the history of the town when she slept not, and of that period I am about to write.

The days of '49 had come and gone; California had been invaded by the restless gold-seekers, and the entire appearance of the country had been changed as if by magic. At first the southern coast had known but little of these pushing, fortune-seeking adventurers, for the golden stores were in the center and the northern part of the land, but, as time wore on, the prospectors, moving southward, "struck it rich" in the mountains near the Rio Colorado, close to where the Gila flows into the main river.

Tales of the golden sands of the Gila have been common on the frontier ever since the existence of gold in California has been known, and, at last, romance has become reality.

San Diego was the nearest port to the new diggings, and as a tremendous emigration at once began the moment the "find" got to be noised about, the old town all of a sudden became wonderfully lively.

The easiest way for the gold-seekers to reach the "promised land" was to take ship at San Francisco, sail southward to San Diego and then proceed overland. Every vessel along the coast, that could possibly do so, rushed into this lucrative business. There were no railroads in those days, and the country east of the coast was almost a wilderness. A stage line was established, running from San Diego to the new mines, and a camp speedily grew up near the junction of the Gila and the Colorado, about on the spot where Fort Yuma now stands; but San Diego was the town that prospered, for nearly all the emigrants passed through, and were, perforce, compelled to halt for a day or two to prepare their outfit; very few parties indeed took the long overland journey southward, or sailed around into the Gulf of California and up the Colorado.

So at the time of which I write a more busy, bustling place than San Diego even a Californian sun had never shone upon.



"BY WHAT RIGHT DO YOU INTERFERE?" CRIED CAPTAIN VOLCANO. "WHAT IS THIS AFFAIR TO YOU, ANYWAY?"

With the gold-seekers had come the birds of prey that thrived and fattened upon them. Dance and gambling-houses abounded, but the big affair of the town was the Fandango Hall, as it was termed. An enterprising Mexican had erected a huge shanty on the outskirts of the town; put a bar and an orchestra, such as it was, in one end; employed some fifteen or sixteen girls, who were always ready to dance for the asking, and who were supposed to be visitors, the daughters of the aristocracy of the town, by the guileless miners who knew no better, and as a natural consequence the Fandango Hall never lacked for patrons from eight in the evening until midnight. Then, too, quite a number of the girls of the town, young women some of them, no better than they should be, visited the popular place for amusement; so that San Diego, at the time of this gold craze, was fully supplied with "attractions," and if a man wanted to while away an hour or two pleasantly in the evening he was always sure of "fun" by going to Don Ramon's ranch.

The Mexican was a cunning fellow, a man of more than ordinary wit. His great boast was that his place was far superior to the common dance-houses which, like mushrooms, had sprung up so suddenly. "The best people of the town come to my saloon!" he was wont to declare—"not only the gentlemen, but the ladies," and in order to make this assertion appear like the truth, all the girls wore masks, just as if they were ladies of high degree out for a lark. And there is no doubt, too, that, thanks to the masking custom, respectable girls ventured out of pure curiosity to pay a visit to the famous saloon, who would never have dared to be seen there with uncovered faces.

This one thing made the place popular. Each and every man of the miners, no matter how rough or uncultured he was, cherished the belief that the masked lady with whom he had the honor of dancing was a scion of one of the old cattle-kings, the heiress in her own right to at least a thousand broad acres.

The Don's profit came from the custom that prevailed at the end of each dance of the couples marching up to the bar where the gentlemen stood treat for the liquid refreshments—wine, mescal, or "whisky straight."

The Don's own girls chose whisky; but as it was a clear impossibility for them to drink eight or ten glasses of such "pizen" and attend to their duties—three or four glasses of the potent fluid being generally sufficient to lay out an average miner—the Don generally gave the girls clear water, just flavored with the fiery tanglefoot, and so reaped an amazing profit.

On the night that opens this veracious tale that I am about to relate, the town was more than usually full; a large schooner had just arrived that afternoon bringing some fifty passengers, and of course after the voyage all of them were eager for excitement; so Fandango Hall was well filled. A dance had just finished, the couples had promenaded up to the bar, tossed off their drinks, and the Don, in a loud voice, called out:

"Now, señors and gentlemen all, take your partners, for the music is about to strike up!"

In obedience to this, the "gentlemen" who desired to dance at once sought for partners, and with one of these gentlemen our story has much to do.

He was a tall, well-built man, no longer young, with a strongly-marked, foreign-looking face, crispy-curling black hair and a short jet-black beard. He looked like a Frenchman, and although as roughly dressed as any of the rest of the pilgrims, yet he had a certain air and grace about him which is supposed to be peculiar to the Gaul.

He had picked out a well-formed and rather tallish girl who, like all the rest, was closely masked, and approaching her had solicited the honor of her hand for the next dance.

"I pray that you will excuse me, sir," replied the girl, evidently embarrassed by the request: "I am tired and would rather not dance this time."

The Frenchman, for of that nationality was the stranger, looked with considerable astonishment at the lady. A man of the world who had traveled extensively, and mingled with almost all kinds of society from the broadcloth dandies of the Parisian *salon* to the flannel-shirted miners of '49, he at once detected that the girl was no ordinary attendant of the place. Her voice was rich and deep, and sweet as sweetest music, and the cultured accents betrayed to the careful observer that she was a lady born and bred, who evidently had been attracted to Fandango Hall out of pure curiosity.

The man, at once seeing that there was a chance for an adventure here, was not disposed to take no for an answer.

"Reconsider your determination, I beg of you," he said, with a courtly politeness unexpected from one of his rough appearance, clad as he was in true frontier fashion, flannel shirt, rough trousers tucked into big boots, soft felt hat, and a whole arsenal of weapons belted to his waist.

"Pray excuse me; I would rather not," the lady stammered.

"Don't you see that you are making yourself

disagreeable?" he said, his voice in the ear of the Frenchman. "I am sure that he gave as he turned, was one of genuine surprise not unmixed with alarm."

The scene was in one corner of the hall near the door, and, as nearly every one in the room was flocking toward the center, preparing for the dance, the conversation attracted little notice. In fact, only one man besides the three parties interested paid any attention to it, and this man was standing with his back to the parties, leaning against one of the pillars that supported the roof.

As the Frenchman turned he was confronted by features seemingly not unfamiliar to him, and yet he felt sure that he had never encountered the party before.

The speaker was rather slightly built, of medium height, with an odd, effeminate-looking face, olive skin, dark hair and eyes. His dress was an odd mixture of sailor garb and Mexican combined, and from his peculiar gait, when he walked, it was evident that the deep and he were no strangers.

CHAPTER II. CAPTAIN VOLCANO.

Few of the old inhabitants of the town but could have told the new-comer's name at once, for he was a noted character.

Captain Volcano, he was called, the skipper of a little rakish sloop, which pretended to be engaged in the coasting trade, but rumor said was more of a smuggler than a coaster, and that, when occasion offered, did not hesitate to fly the black flag bearing the skull and crossbones, and thus add piracy to the list of her occupations.

At the time of which we write, Mexico, as usual with that unhappy country, was undergoing the throes of revolution, and the officials, placed in command of the seaport towns, did not hesitate to wink at any little infraction of the law, so long as it brought grist to their mill, and was not too public. Holding their offices by a most uncertain tenure, they had no idea how soon a successful revolution might upset them, and so they "made hay while the sun shone."

Indeed, so bold were the smugglers, and so openly did they ply their trade, that the person of the most notorious law-breaker of them all, Sandy Sabino, the Smuggler Chief of Table Mountain, was as well known in the towns along the coast, both on the Californian and Mexican side, as the alcaldes who rule over the seaports. Said alcaldes, too, almost to a man, were the close friends and allies of these law-breaking rascals.

And, after Sandy Sabino, the most noted man was this Captain Volcano, whose saucy craft, "The Fair Isabel," was reported to be able to out sail any vessel on the coast.

A strange expression, as said, came over the face of the Frenchman as he looked upon the young man, and yet, it was hardly possible that he knew who he was—being a stranger to San Diego.

As for the lady, she seemed terribly agitated, and drew the lace shawl which she wore up n her head, Spanish fashion, down closer over her features, as though she feared the mask was not sufficient to disguise her face.

"Come, come! Begone about your business!" Captain Volcano continued, in an imperious tone. "The lady does not desire your company, and if you don't go, I shall be obliged to kick you out!"

For a moment the big veins upon the forehead of the Frenchman swelled, and, almost involuntarily, his fists clenched, but he was a man used to exciting scenes, and was noted for keeping his wits about him; his quick eyes, fixed apparently upon the captain, yet noticed that four well-armed and resolute-looking men were now paying particular attention to this little scene—alikes, the Frenchman well realized, of the bold speaker.

With quick-witted prudence the Gaul relaxed his frown, unclenched his hands, as he answered:

"I beg your pardon, sir; I beg the lady's pardon, also. I assure you, no offense was intended."

"We don't allow you miserable gold-seekers to walk over us!" the captain persisted, in a most arrogant manner, apparently intent upon picking a quarrel.

"No offense was intended, and I will depart," replied the Frenchman, civilly.

But, this "backing down," was entirely too much for the man leaning against the post, who had been listening to the conversation.

"Bah! this is too much of a good thing!" he cried, wheeling around and confronting the party.

The speaker was a muscularly-built fellow, habited with a great deal of care, wearing a short velvet coat, and the ruffled shirt, which, in the flush days of California, was the symbol of the sport who followed cards for a living.

A better representative of his class it would have been hard to find. He had been a passenger on the schooner which had arrived that day, and, on the passage his fellow-passengers, with that odd habit so common to the early miners, had found a name for him. For offensive weapons, he wore a pair of self-cocking revolvers belted to his waist, and the butts of these trusty tools were formed of bone, stained to a bright crimson hue; so, these "tools" gave a name to the man.

They called him the Red Revolver, and he smilingly acknowledged the title. He was a very quiet fellow, seemingly, and kept himself to himself, so that the Frenchman, who had established a bowing acquaintanceship with the sport, on the passage, was really astonished at this outbreak.

"Too much! several jugfuls too much!" he continued. "Strangers, I really beg your pardon for interfering, but it is a habit I have; I can't help it. I know it is rather 'fresh'—in fact, one might say entirely too fresh, but it is my nature, and a man can't go against his nature. You are putting on entirely too many frills, sir," and here he addressed his conversation directly to the captain, who scowled at him in astonishment and anger. "As a free American citizen I cannot allow it. I don't know who you are—don't know you, sir, from a side of sole-leather, and I don't care two bits if I never know you; but see hyer, my friend, why on earth do you stand it?" to the Frenchman.

"You don't look like a man to take water, and as far as I can see you ain't said nary word that you ought to be ashamed of. This man wants to quarrel; that is as plain as the elegant nose on his elegant face. Now, oblige him, for the love of goodness. Don't let him cavort round hyer with a chip on his shoulder, a-dying for some one to knock it off."

The Frenchman looked embarrassed; the captain's face was black with anger; the four men drew nearer, while the girl, the original and innocent cause of the difficulty, looked on with dilated eyes.

"By what right do you interfere?" cried the captain. "What is this affair to you, anyway?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, and that is the reason I chip in. I am so fresh, you see; salt wouldn't save me, my friends say. But I'm just the man for you; you're spoiling for a fight I should judge; if you are, and this pilgrim don't feel like accommodating you, why, I am the man for your money."

"I have no quarrel with you," replied the other, loftily, and it was plain that he did not desire a difficulty with the knight of the red revolvers.

"Well, what do you say?" demanded the unknown, turning to the Frenchman. "Are you going to take it up, or are you going to let this cock of the walk crow over a pilgrim?"

But the Frenchman, for some reason, was not inclined to carry the matter further, and so expressed himself.

"I do not wish to quarrel with any one; the gentleman meant no offense, I am sure, and I am willing to withdraw."

The proud lip of Captain Volcano curled in contempt.

"The stranger is a parson, perhaps, and comes to preach peace and good-will," he remarked, sarcastically; "if it is so, all right, but if he comes to seek for gold, and intends to tread in another's trail, let him look out for himself; that is all."

"Oho!" cried he of the red revolvers, "there is something back of this, eh? You are no strangers to each other."

"You are wrong, sir; I never saw this gentleman before," the Frenchman hastened to observe.

"And, upon my part, I never saw this man before, and it would not greatly grieve my heart if I never saw him again!" the captain added, with scorn in his manner.

"You are just spoiling for a fight, eh?" the sport remarked. "Say, stranger, do oblige him—do, just for the fun of the thing," appealing to the Frenchman. "You will have to settle this thing some time, you know; the race this young cock-a-doodle comes of are noted for long memories where vengeance is concerned. Come, pluck up courage and smack him in the face. I will stand by and see fair play."

"No, no; I want no trouble, here."

"I will have to take it up myself, then," the Red Revolver observed, and before any of them anticipated what he was about to do, with the palm of his right hand he dealt the Californian a sounding smack in the face.

CHAPTER III.

A LITTLE FUSS.

CAPTAIN VOLCANO, despite his youth and slender frame, wherein dwelt a wondrous strength, was a "tough customer"—a veritable "cock of the walk," and had often "made Rome howl" when ignorant and ugly pilgrims had disputed his right to rule. Consequently this act was a most unexpected surprise, that, for a moment, fairly took his breath away, for the slap, though given in the most careless manner, brought tears to the eyes of the Californian.

There was a moment of hesitation—a pause of surprise; the assaulted man gasped with rage, almost choked with anger; his four "heelers" stared in amazement; the girl had sprung to her feet in great alarm, while the French-

man, pale and evidently full of apprehension, gazed silently upon the scene.

It was as if they all had posed for a tableau, and were afraid to stir lest they should spoil the effect of the picture.

But, action came at last; the captain, with a great cry, plucked forth one of the silver-mounted revolvers which he wore belted to his shapely waist; then in his blind rage he leveled it at the breast of the other, neglecting to raise the hammer, and attempted to fire. To the surprise of all present the strange assailant did not attempt to "pull" a weapon, but was as self-possessed as the other was blinded with passion; so the moment the captain leveled the weapon and pressed the trigger, with a dextrous kick the stranger sent the revolver flying up into the air, then, with quickness, he seized the captain by the throat—grasping the loosely-knotted silk handkerchief which, sailor-fashion, he wore—and by the waistband of his flowing sailor pantaloons and, lifting him from the floor, flung him through the open window, which happened to be right behind him.

Down, with a dull thud, to the ground outside, came the captain, stunned by the fall.

This daring act awoke the Californian's bullies from their stupor. With a yell of rage they rushed upon the bold pilgrim, confident in their numbers; but whack! whack! whack! whack! resounded four quick blows through the Fandango Hall, as the white but steel-like knuckles of the pilgrim left their mark on the bloated faces of the bullies—each blow dropping the man.

Howling with rage up they sprung, only to be knocked down again by this wonderful sport; three separate times they arose, and three separate times the Red Revolver knocked them off their feet with a single blow, his arms seeming to work with the power of the piston-rod of a steam engine.

Never before had San Diego witnessed such a sight, and the inmates of Fandango Hall gathered near the scene, gazed with wonder and astonishment.

Bruised and bleeding after the third knock-down the discomfited men did not attempt to rise, having had enough of those terrible iron knuckles, as their disfigured visages amply proved; but, as if actuated by a common impulse, they clutched their pistols, which, hitherto, they had not tampered with; but, the moment they attempted this forth flashed the self-cocking red revolvers.

"Play light with those popguns!" the sport warned; "the first man that draws a weapon on me I'll plug instant!"

The prompt action cowed the ruffians, who only too well knew that the bold adventurer would be as good as his word. A man so handy with his fists undoubtedly was just as expert with his weapons.

Don Ramon now thought it was time for him to interfere.

"Hold on! do not fire!" he yelled; "the first man who pulls trigger we will half murder!"

"What is the trouble with you?" the hardy stranger inquired, apparently in profound astonishment. "Who is a-treading on your toes, anyway?"

"There must be no more fighting here!" the Mexican persisted.

"And who in thunder is a-going to fight?" demanded the other. "Maybe you think that there has been, or is going to be, trouble between these gentlemen and myself? Why, bless your innocent heart! you never made a greater mistake. There ain't the least bit of ill-feeling 'twixt these sharps and myself, is there, boys? Not one of you fellows wants to have a fuss with me, do you, boys?"

And, as the stranger put the question he smiled, yet kept the glistening tubes leveled at the prostrate men, who, for answer to his demand, nodded their heads in assent to the declaration.

"But, I have a quarrel with you!" cried a voice, hoarse with rage, and the passion-inflamed face of Captain Volcano appeared in the window. "Turn and meet your death!"

A cocked pistol was in the smuggler's hand, but he refrained from firing until his adversary should turn and face him. But, the Red Revolver was not a man upon whom it was safe to try such tricks, for, upon the instant he wheeled, and fired as he wheeled, apparently without taking the slightest aim, and before Volcano could pull a trigger although all ready for the deed.

With a groan the captain pitched forward half into the room, his body hanging on the window-sill, the pistol dropping from his nerveless hand and exploding as it fell.

"Don't be alarmed; he's all right. I only 'creased' him on the head to teach him manners. He'll be all right in ten minutes and worth a dozen dead men," the adventurer exclaimed.

CHAPTER IV. THE SECRET.

"WELL, ta-ta; you will have to excuse me, for the present," the Red Revolver continued. "I will drop in and see you all again before I take the overland trail;" and then, backing to-

ward the door, as he spoke, with a courteous bow he vanished through the portal. Never since San Diego had a local habitation and a name had its citizens witnessed a man enter a den of wild beasts, and withdraw with such perfect ease and grace; but all drew a long breath, every man and woman in the room, as this wonderful fellow vanished. And then the four bullies rushed to the assistance of their chief, while the Mexican, in a loud voice, bade the musicians strike up, and called upon the "señors" present to take their partners for the dances. What was it to the revelers whether the limp form hanging on the window-sill had any life left in it or not? A few of them had curiosity enough to remain on the spot of excitement, but the rest resumed their positions, the music began, and the dance went on.

The Frenchman had followed the Red Revolver, at once, and the masked woman, about whom the quarrel had originated, seized upon the opportunity to escape unobserved.

The unknown had spoken truly when he had said that the captain was not seriously hurt. He had performed upon him the dextrous operation which is at once the pride and boast of the frontier marksman—had "creased" his man—that is, had sent the bullet so near to the head that it just grazed the skin, producing a stunning sensation, but not inflicting any wound.

The Frenchman, following directly in the footsteps of the other, soon came up with his mysterious friend. The moon was high in the heavens and afforded plenty of light.

"I want to thank you, sir, for the assistance you afforded me."

"Oh, don't mention it; you are perfectly welcome; but, I say, partner," remarked the sharp, "you will excuse my saying it, but, you have less sand than any man I have seen for some time. For a while I reckoned I wouldn't interfere in the fuss, because you was big enough and old enough to take your own part; but, when I saw that you were going to take water, my blood boiled right up, and I had to wade in."

The Frenchman's face was grave, and he looked carefully around him, as if he was afraid of being overheard, but there was not a soul within sight.

"Sir, I am no coward, as events may prove, some day; if this affair to-night had been a mere personal quarrel between man and man, I would not have been backward in taking my own part, but, there are certain reasons why I should avoid a difficulty if I possibly can, although I see now that it will be impossible for me to do so, for my foes are determined to force a quarrel upon me. I did not think any one would know me here, but, I was recognized the moment I landed, and my enemies have dogged my footsteps ever since, and I clearly see now that it is to be a life or death struggle between us. I must either kill them—and there may be twenty of them, for aught I know—or else they will kill me. You have befriended me to-night, and, in return, if you like, I will put you on a track which will either lead to a fortune or a grave."

"I'm your man, old fellow!" the other responded, in his cheery way. "I have seen Death grin at me too often to be skeered of the old man, provided I can see the glitter of gold back of him."

"We must not be overheard in our conversation."

"I've got a cache in a little clump of timber out yonder, where I left my blankets, for I am about broke, and can't stand hotel bills; so I calculated to bunk there to-night, expecting to get off to-morrow, or the next day, for the mines. We can talk there without being overheard."

"It is a good idea; I will explain my plans to you, and then, if you care to join in with me, why, I will share your lodgings, for I, too, haven't much spare money."

"Come along, then."

"How may I call your name?" asked the other, as they walked onward.

"Jackson Blake; and yours?"

"Louis Grandville; I am a French Canadian by birth, but, for some years—in fact, ever since the discovery of gold, I have been a resident of this coast."

When the two reached the little clump of timber, Blake examined his cache and found that his blankets were all right; then the two seated themselves and the Frenchman began his story.

"This San Diego is a very old town, as I presume you know," he said. "Ten or twelve years ago chance led my wandering footsteps hither. Then the great business hereabouts was cattle-raising. I found employment with quite an extensive ranchero named John Carisee, and in a very short time became his right-hand man. I was with him when the gold excitement in California broke out, and when I heard the stories of the rich discoveries I became satisfied that there was also plenty of gold down in this country. Carisee was also of my way of thinking, and he and I, together with the major-domo who attended to the ranch—Pedro Sabino—spent many hours in exploring the wild country to the eastward of here. At last, one day, fortune crowned my efforts with

success. In a wild, solitary ravine, a short distance from Carisee creek, so called because Carisee was the first settler on its banks, I found traces of 'color,' and the outcropping was so good, and some peculiarity of the place so marked, that I felt satisfied I had stumbled upon one of the old mines which the Indians used to work, the secret of whose existence they guarded so jealously from the white invaders. Of course the growth of the vegetation of nearly a century had effectually covered up all traces of man's handiwork. The moment I made this discovery I felt that I was rich—rich beyond my wildest dreams, for I knew enough about mining to understand that this was one of those wonderful gold deposits which could be worked with the rudest kind of tools, and did not require machinery. Of course I resolved to keep this discovery to myself, and to seize upon all the chances I could to steal away and work at the rich strike; but the very next day in the ravine I came face to face with John Carisee, and the moment I encountered him I saw by the expression upon his face that he, too, had discovered the existence of the mine. Of course there was enough for both; there wasn't any need of our quarreling over the matter, but I felt in my bones that we should, although we came to an amicable agreement and agreed to keep the existence of the mine a secret and to share and share alike. I distrusted him; and not without cause, for that very night he attempted to assassinate me, and I frankly confess that, in the struggle which followed, I did the best I could to kill him. The same motive animated us both; neither was willing to share the mine with another. Luck was on my side and I got the better of Carisee, but, just as I had overpowered him, Carisee's daughter, a wild little devil of a twelve-year-old girl, came to his assistance with Sabino and the herdsmen, and I was forced to fly, which I did, and successfully escaped pursuit. Carisee died from the result of his injuries the very next day, and from that time to this the secret of the mine has not been discovered as far as I can learn. These new strikes are far to the eastward. Thinking that this old Carisee affair had all died out, and that there was no one living to call me to an account—for Carisee's only living relative was this little imp of a daughter whom I have mentioned; Juana she was called—I determined to return and help myself to the treasure of the old mine, but the moment I landed I was recognized and three or four attempts have been made to draw me into a quarrel, so that my life could be successfully assailed. I cannot understand, unless this girl Juana is still alive, still resides here, and in some mysterious way recognized me as the murderer of her father."

"That is probably the right explanation; she would now be a woman of twenty-two or thereabouts."

"Yes, and this fellow who assailed me so persistently to-night is her lover possibly, or husband."

"Well, the first thing for you to do is to find out whether Juana Carisee is alive or not."

"Yes; and in the meantime I must be on my guard. Now you stood my friend to-night, and I will make you a fair offer. Go in with me in this affair and you shall have half the mine."

"It's a bargain, old fellow, and I am with you," the other replied. "I am open for any kind of a speculation, and I reckon this one will exactly suit, for I am not happy if I am not in mischief, and from what little I have seen of this affair already I reckon there will be a heap of fighting afore you get your fingers onto the gold of this secret mine."

"The prize is worthy of the risk!" the Frenchman earnestly declared.

Just then, out on the still air of the night, rung the sharp sound of horses' hoofs. On the wild frontier suspicion and vigilance become second nature; the two partners instantly clutched their arms and withdrew into the clump of woods.

On came the horsemen, thirty of them at least, and all well armed. At a rapid gallop they surrounded the little clump of timber cover, wherein the two had taken refuge, and then halted, while distinctly to the listening two came the ringing sound of the clicking steel as the riders cocked their firearms.

Beyond a doubt the horsemen were on mischief intent.

CHAPTER V. THE ALCALDE.

THE face of the Frenchman grew dark as he marked the line of steel which so completely surrounded the little timber wherein he and his companion had taken refuge, but, as for the other he did not seem affected, as he counted the men and noted how well they were armed.

"Thirty of them," he quietly remarked. "Well, we will have our hands full if they mean business."

The Frenchman cast a quick glance at the American as he demanded:

"What could two men do against thirty?"

"That depends upon the two men and of what stuff the thirty are made of," Blake replied. "In my short life I have seen one man

run twenty-five, and the twenty-five scampered as though a fiend from the lower regions was after them; that is greater odds than thirty against two."

"But in this case it would be madness to offer resistance if they do come after us; we should only be butchered in cold blood!"

"If we are going to be murdered in the end, why, I, for one, would rather die at once, making a bold fight for my life; but, pard, I'll take ten to one, make the amount big enough, that I can clean out the whole crowd if I had half a show."

The Frenchman was convinced that this was idle boast, but a movement upon the part of the new comers ended the conversation.

Three of the horsemen had remained together apparently in consultation, and now one of them advanced to the trees, holding up his right hand as he advanced in token of amity. He was dressed in the semi-Mexican costume common to the dwellers on the South-western border, carried no weapons beyond the knife and pistols stuck in his belt, and as he approached the two pards saw that he was a man well in years, stout in form, with a little, round, fat face, wherein shone cunning, pig-like eyes—a face full of treachery and deceit.

"He's a bad egg, pardner," averred the American, as the horseman halted and called out:

"Gentlemen, I desire a few words with you."

"We are at your service," responded Blake, stepping from the shelter of the trees, but first whispering to his companion: "Keep your eyes skinned, and if any of these galoots show hostile sign plug him on the instant."

The horseman stared, apparently amazed at the business-like air in which he was received.

"I am waiting your pleasure," the American continued, peremptorily, finding that the other did not speak.

"Yes, yes, I see; I must introduce myself, and I beg that neither one of you will be hasty with your weapons!" the horseman exclaimed, evidently confused. "My name is Peter de Salvador, the Alcalde of San Diego."

Blake made him a low bow.

"Alcalde, I am truly delighted at making your acquaintance!"

Again the Californian looked hard at the speaker; old Peter de Salvador, anything but stupid, began to think the American was making fun of him.

"I am the Alcalde of San Diego—"

"So you said before," interrupted Blake, "and I feel quite sure of it; I would be willing to bet any man five dollars on your word, for you don't look like a man who would lie—"

The alcalde grinned.

"—A man who would lie without being able to make something by it."

The smile faded quickly from the lips of the official and a look of distrust came in its place. He did not like the style of this free and outspoken individual, so he came at once to business.

"Gentlemen, I regret to say that there has been some grave charges made against you, and as alcalde of the town I have been compelled to take notice of them."

"Grave charges made against us?" Blake repeated. "Well, now, this beats the Limburger Dutch!"

"You and your companion have nearly murdered five worthy citizens."

"Oh, is that what you mean?" and Blake spoke as though he was greatly relieved. "That little skirmish, eh? Well, has any one of them gone dead?"

"No; but nearly all are badly hurt, and Captain Volcano accuses you of attempting to murder him."

"That is the name of the fellow, eh?" Blake rejoined—"Captain Volcano! Well, that is a deuce of a name and it fits him as if he was made for it. So he accuses me of attempting his life? Of all the impudent things I ever heard of! Why, he was boiling over for a fight—was going around with a chip on his shoulder daring people to come and knock it off, and now he takes water in this way! I wouldn't have believed it!"

"You have come to arrest us?" asked the Frenchman, who had been carefully calculating the chances.

"Yes, sir."

"But this man didn't have anything to do with it!" Blake explained. "I'm your mutton! I'm the very man that did the mischief!"

"My good friends, I know absolutely nothing of the affair," the alcalde replied, in his softest manner. "Of course as an officer of the law it is my business to receive all complaints, but of their truth I know nothing. A trial must establish that."

"What do you say?" exclaimed Blake, abruptly, turning to his companion; "shall we surrender or not?"

Both Frenchman and Californian stared.

"What else can we do?"

"Yes, how can you help surrendering?" the alcalde interposed. "You are surrounded by thirty men, all well armed."

"So—so!" was Red Revolver's remark.

"Well, pardner, if you want to surrender I am

agreeable, but if you say fight we can clean out this crowd and not half try."

The Frenchman shook his head; he did not dare to risk it.

"No, no, we will not offend against the law; I feel sure we will have a fair trial and when the truth comes out it will be seen that we were not in the wrong."

"All right, sir; that satisfies me; I am not at all afraid to lay the case before a jury of my countrymen," the American declared. "So, produce your warrant, squire, and I'm your man!"

The alcalde looked confused; he had set out in such hot haste that he had neglected to provide himself with the necessary legal documents.

"I—I haven't a warrant," he admitted.

"What!" cried Blake, apparently greatly surprised; "no warrant? and you come, horse, foot and dragoons, to arrest us? Go along! you are crazy! Don't you know that you cannot deprive a free American citizen of his liberty without due process of law?"

The alcalde shook his head; he hadn't the warrant but he had the men, and made up his mind to have the prisoners, too.

The Frenchman interposed, seeing trouble brewing:

"Let us go; we are innocent and have nothing to fear."

"Oh, I will go fast enough, but not as a prisoner. I will go, just as I am, arms and all, and just warn your galoots not to try any nonsense with me or I will fit some of them for coffins before you can say Jack Robinson."

The alcalde hastened to assure the American that he should be treated with all due respect; and so he was by all of the cohort, for already they had learned to admire the prowess of the stranger, and great was the throng that gathered in the streets when the cavalcade reentered the town.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SMUGGLER'S HAUNT.

JUST below San Diego, close to the line of the coast, and just over the Mexican frontier, Table Mountain rears its series of broken, irregular heads. Wild and desolate is the locality, and just suited for a haunt of desperate men.

At the time of which I write, there was a great deal of smuggling going on all along the Mexican frontier. The Mexican Government, always in a strait for funds, had seen fit to impose very high duties on all imported articles, thereby hoping to raise sufficient money to pay its running expenses, and, as has always been the case in every such circumstance, the moment the high duties were put on, a perfect swarm of smugglers sprung up.

The Mexican line was an extremely difficult one to guard, being so extensive, and passing, at times, through a rough and uninhabited region, therefore it was the easiest thing in the world to smuggle past the custom-houses light and valuable articles, upon which a heavy tax was laid; and, in nine cases out of ten, too, the official in command of the district, whose business it was to ferret out, prevent and punish these violations of the law, was in actual league with the law-breakers, and shared the spoils.

One of the boldest bands, who were thus turning a dishonest penny by defrauding the government, had its headquarters in the rugged region over which Table Mountain reigned. The spot was a favorable one for the purpose, being at the head of the long strip of land known as Lower California, and close to the American line. On one side washed the waves of the great Pacific, and on the other the placid waters of the Gulf of California. The smugglers' vessels took their precious cargoes on board at San Francisco, then sailed southward and made a landing in a little bay, at the base of Table Mountain; the goods were packed on mules' backs and transported across to the Gulf of California; there another craft received them and carried them to the Southern Mexican towns. It was an extremely lucrative business, and all parties concerned in it were making money fast.

That the smugglers had a haunt on Table Mountain was more than suspected, and the chief of the gang, one Sandy Sabino, a muscular, dark-browed, middle-aged fellow, was as well known in San Diego by the nickname of The Smuggler Chief of Table Mountain, as by his own proper appellation.

And now that the reader has an idea of the smugglers, and the causes which led to their existence, we will at once proceed to the part in which the outlaw band have to play in this ower tale.

Night had fallen, but the big round moon, high in the heavens, made the darkness visible, and afforded ample light for a group of three men, seated upon the ground at the door of a rude hut, near the base of the mountain, to see each other.

The party were all smoking cigarettes, for your true Californian is a slave to the fragrant weed; two had been in waiting, and the third had just joined them. One of the two was Captain Volcano—the other, the bold, brawny

smuggler chief, Sabino, while the third, the new-comer, who had ridden in haste from the town of San Diego, as the panting sides of his patient mule, now tethered near by, could testify, was the fat alcalde, De Salvador.

It was near midnight, and the alcalde, who had started from the town immediately after seeing the prisoners properly disposed of, had, indeed, come at wondrous speed, for, though the distance was not great, the road was a terribly bad one.

The eyes of the captain sparkled with delight when he learned that the men had been captured.

"You have them safe, eh?"

"Oh, yes," and the old alcalde grinned; "I have them all safe enough, but, in this case, it seems to me a good deal like the man who caught the tiger by the tail. We have got the prize all right, but, now that we have got it, what are we going to do with it?"

"We must finish them!" cried Volcano, with savage earnestness. "The Frenchman deserves to die; his life has been forfeited for over ten years, and, as for the other one, he richly merits his fate for interfering in a quarrel which did not concern him."

"Yes, yes, this is all very well, but, how is the matter to be arranged?" the old alcalde persisted. "It will be no easy matter, I assure you. The arrest has already caused a great excitement in the town. These adventurers don't like it, and they are talking big and bold; and, let me tell you, señor captain, we of San Diego are at the mercy of this rabble if they once took the bit between their teeth and made up their mind to run the town for a while. They are all armed, the infernal, wild devils! and they are not in the least afraid to use their arms. Caramba! would you believe it—would mortal man believe it—this dare-devil coolly proposed to fight all thirty of us, single-handed, and I believe he would have attempted it, too, if the Frenchman had not persuaded him to the contrary."

The smuggler chief opened his little, bead-like eyes to their fullest extent at this information.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, "that is just the kind of man I should like to get hold of. We will need some men of metal, for I have secret information that the Government has detached a secret officer to ferret out our haunts, and also dispatched a revenue cutter to patrol this coast; so, captain, in future the Fair Isabel must not only be prepared to show a clean pair of heels but also a good set of teeth."

"You could not do anything with this fellow," the alcalde resumed. "He is the coolest and most impudent dog I have ever seen; one of that kind of men it is impossible to handle, and from what I have seen of him I believe the rascal would rather fight than eat."

"Well, in that case the quicker we dispose of him the better," the old smuggler observed.

"Ah, but there is the rub!" the alcalde rejoined. "How is it to be done? We have him in our hands, it is true, but the charge against him is not a serious one, and you must remember the men are not friendless; all the vagabond adventurers in the town will espouse their cause."

"Let the captain appear and charge these men with attempting to murder him; they will demand a trial, of course; you will appoint a day to try the case and have them locked up until the time arrives, and in the meanwhile, in the prison and weaponless, it will be easy to make away with them," Sabino suggested.

"No, no, no!" cried the alcalde, in alarm, "that plan would never do! No doubt it would work, but it would surely create a riot; the Americans would tear everything to pieces. We must think of something else. I am not going to risk my life in any such foolhardy manner."

"By the way, alcalde, did you know that your daughter, the charming Margerite, was mixed up in this matter?" asked the captain, abruptly.

"No, indeed I did not," replied the alcalde, surprised.

"Oh, yes, she was the veiled woman about whom the whole trouble arose. I recognized her, although that really didn't make any difference for it was my game to force a quarrel on the Frenchman so as to be able to wreak my vengeance on him, and if his speaking to Margerite had not afforded me the opportunity I would have found it in some other way."

"Well, girls will be girls," the old man observed, sagely, "and Margerite was always a little headstrong. It is like her to wish to see the interior of the Fandango Hall—"

"You are not keeping your compact with me very well in regard to the girl," the captain interrupted, in an injured sort of way.

"How can I? I have done all I can for you. From morn till night I chant your praises; that is all I can do. Were I to say to the girl, you must marry Captain Volcano, it would ruin everything, for, upon the instant, so headstrong is her nature, she would be sure to reply that she would not, and then all the fat would be in the fire. She is not a girl to be driven; she must be coaxed and led."

Captain Volcano.

"But come, we are wasting time," the old smuggler reminded; "what of these two men?"

For a moment the alcalde tapped his forehead with his fat forefinger reflectively; then his face brightened up, while he grinned in the cunning way peculiar to him.

"I have it!" he cried—"a scheme which is sure to succeed. It is more than probable that, when my girl learns the fellows are in jail she will come to me to intercede for them. I will pretend to be touched by her appeal, but I will tell her I dare not openly interfere because I am afraid of offending public sentiment which runs high against them, but that I will aid them secretly to escape; that I will provide horses and give her the keys so that, after nightfall, when the town is buried in slumber, she can release them and tell them where the animals are concealed; the very little bit of woods where I captured the fellows to-night would answer. They of course will set out at once. You, captain, with your men, can be ambushed in the trees, and then, when they come up, a single volley will end the business for good and all."

"By Saint Peter, it is a most excellent plan!" exclaimed the old smuggler chief, warmly.

"I had much rather meet the fellow in a fair fight," the captain protested, still smarting under the defeat which he had sustained.

"Yes, yes, that is all right; but we want to make a sure thing out of it," the alcalde assured. "And now, since you tell me that Margerite is mixed up in the affair, why, it sort of becomes a personal matter with me, for if she has happened to take a fancy to this vagabond, it will make trouble."

Everything was finally arranged; then the alcalde mounted his mule and rode back to San Diego.

Many things about this affair puzzled him. Why the captain should bear such a deadly hatred to the Frenchman was a mystery, whose secret, if it was possible, he would penetrate and solve.

CHAPTER VII. THE TRIAL.

THERE was great excitement in San Diego the next morning when the news of the arrest of the two men spread abroad, and great was the indignation of the pilgrims.

The idea that a man should be arrested simply because he came off first best in a little difficulty was, in the opinion of the "sharps," outrageous, and they did not hesitate to express their minds, freely and loudly.

One quaint-looking and odd-speaking character made himself very conspicuous. He was a tall, gaunt fellow, attired in a semi-military suit, very much the worse for wear, with a face that looked as if cut out of a pine knot, so rough and hard was it; from under the little fatigue cap on his head long sandy hair came down in tangled masses, and a scrubby beard of the same hue covered his chin. From appearance neither hair nor beard had been touched by scissors or razor for many a day.

How he had ever got to the town no one knew. He had abruptly walked into the Fandango Hall, one night, and executing a waltz in the middle of the room, had proclaimed that he was a chief, and could outdance, outfight or outdrink any man in the bacca-room.

As a rule such a challenge met with a prompt response, but on this occasion the ridiculous antics of the man only excited a roar of laughter, whereupon the stranger improved the opportunity to explain his business and seek for customers. He was a lead-pencil peddler, and, as he declared, "A more useful article to any of you sharps don't exist, for, gentlemen, how kin you figure up how much dust you have without a pencil? How kin you tell how much money you won last night at poker without a pencil? It can't be did. Hyer you are, then, two bits apiece and dirt cheap."

He did a lively trade, too, for nearly every man had a quarter to spare for so useful an article; so the pencil man, as he was generally termed, hung on around the town, making his living by his trade, but not neglecting now and then to pick up a few stray dollars at poker, and as the men, who had the luck, or ill-luck as it might be, to play with him, declared "he wasn't no slouch at poker, either."

As customary in such cases his "handle" had been inquired after, and he had answered that he was called Nixey Weeden.

Now, as a rule, men's given names seldom please the fancy of such a crowd as were then congregated in the old city, so they took the liberty of adding to or subtracting from the name, and, in some instances, of bestowing an entirely new appellation. Thus, William Smith became Big-nosed Smith—Thomas Brown, Shorty Brown, and one unfortunate who declared that he was called Reginald Ashburton, at once became transformed into English Pete; but Nixey Weeden was too much for these jokers. An odder appellation they could not find; so they let the name stand.

Two or three cool, quiet and shrewd fellows, men perhaps who had good reasons for being suspicious—the alcalde of the town among them—got the idea into their heads, that the pencil peddler was not exactly what he seemed; they

thought he was playing a part—that some secret motive brought him to San Diego, for his yarn that he had walked there all the way on foot, clear from San Francisco through the uninhabited wilderness, was a little too tough for belief. And then there were some suspicious circumstances about the man that strengthened this idea and afforded good grounds for distrust, as the reader will see, anon.

As we have said, no man in the town howled louder about the injustice of the arrest than the pencil peddler, and he succeeded, as all such loud-mouthed fellows generally do, in kicking up quite an excitement.

The examination was fixed to come off at ten o'clock, but long before that hour the rather small-sized office of the alcalde was crowded to the very doors, and for every one who did succeed in getting into the room there were three who didn't, so they made things lively on the outside.

The trial was an extremely unsatisfactory one, for the men who had procured the arrest were not present, but, in their stead, came a doctor and a lawyer. The doctor, who said he had been called in to attend the injured men, declared his patients had been injured so severely that it would be impossible for them to attend until the next day, and the lawyer who claimed to be retained to represent them begged that the hearing might be postponed until the next morning, promising that his clients would then surely appear.

The crowd growled ominously at this, and the alcalde, anticipating trouble, proceeded to pour oil upon the troubled waters. He said that he deeply regretted there had been any trouble in the case and he nothing doubted that, when the affair came to be looked into, the prisoners would be able to show they were not in the least to blame in the matter, and he hoped they would be willing to agree to wait until the morrow. The two accused, confident that they would be able to prove themselves blameless, said they were satisfied to wait, so were re-conducted to their quarters; then the alcalde adjourned the court until the same hour next day, much to the dissatisfaction of the crowd. Sundry threats were made in regard to hanging the alcalde and the lawyers to the nearest lamp-post, but, acting under the wiser counsels of cooler heads, the talk came to naught.

As the alcalde expected, when he reached home his daughter came to the rescue of the prisoners.

Grapes grow not from thistles, they say; yet, from the line of the fat and gross alcalde as fair a girl had sprung as could be found on all the vast Pacific slope. She was tall and stately in figure, with glorious black eyes and hair like silk and in color ebony as the raven's wing.

"Father, what of the two prisoners?" she demanded.

"They are remanded until to-morrow, for Captain Volcano and his friends are so badly hurt as to be unable to appear against them."

"It is their own fault; the captain and his companions brought it upon themselves. Why did they meddle with the strangers at all?"

"It is hard to say, and I am very much afraid there is trouble ahead. The Californians are all clamoring for the punishment of the two, while the miners are, in turn, yelling for their release. I am in a terrible dilemma. If I let the men go free, without punishment, the townsmen will declare that I am afraid of the rabble, while, on the contrary, if I impose a punishment upon them these gold-seekers will be certain to tear everything to pieces in their rage. In either case all the blame will fall upon me; do what I can, it is impossible to satisfy both parties. Oh, if they would only get out—escape, and never trouble San Diego more I should be perfectly happy."

The girl, artless and never dreaming of guile, at once fell into the trap the old man had so cunningly laid.

"I have it, father!" she exclaimed, a charming smile beaming on her beautiful face. "Give me the keys and I will deliver them from their imprisonment to-night. I will explain to them that, if they remain, San Diego is likely to be deluged in blood."

"But be careful not to let them know that I am aware of what is going on!" the old man continued. "I must respect my office, you know, and not connive at the escape of prisoners in my charge."

"Oh, I will be careful in regard to that."

"If you can only arrange the matter it will be a terrible weight off my mind," the alcalde declared, with a long-fetched sigh. "They must go inland, instantly, too, for some of the Californians may organize a pursuit. This Captain Volcano is a terrible fellow, you know, when he fancies that he is injured."

"Horses must be provided, then."

"Yes; I will attend to that; I will have them concealed at some point well known to the prisoners. By the way, the little clump of timber where they took refuge last night would answer admirably."

"Yes, they will be able to find that, easily enough."

"I will see that the horses are in readiness, and I will pick two of the best beasts that San

Diego holds, but you must attend to all the rest."

"Yes, yes; give me the keys and I will be careful that you are not compromised in any way!" the girl exclaimed, the glow of enthusiasm upon her face. She looked upon her father as the savior of the two men and little thought that the alcalde would not only conceal two horses within the clump of timber but also a score of well-armed men whose business it was to give to death the fugitives.

Carefully the old man arranged all the details. There must be no bungling this time, since Captain Volcano had decreed that both of the men must die.

He counseled his daughter not to attempt the release until well after midnight—between two and three o'clock in the morning, in fact, acting on the old Indian idea that at that hour sleep was deepest.

The night came and passed rapidly, and promptly at two o'clock the devoted girl stood at the door of the apartment wherein the two prisoners had been placed.

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE TRAP.

ACCORDING to agreement the prisoners were treated with all possible courtesy; their arms were not taken from them, and, with the exception that they were not at liberty to go where they would they fared more as guests than as prisoners charged with a weighty crime.

As Blake observed: it was kind of the alcalde to assume the payment of their board and lodging.

The Frenchman, however, was morose, for, evidently, gloomy forebodings filled his mind.

In vain the American strove to raise the spirits of his companion, the effort was fruitless; and so earnest were the two in talking the matter over, Blake hopeful and the Frenchman despondent, that when, long after midnight, the girl on her errand of mercy turned the heavy key softly in the creaking wards of the lock, the prisoners were still busy in conversation.

The first thought of the two was that danger threatened them, and they grasped their weapons, prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

"You see, I was right—they come to assassinate us in our sleep; it is a surprise," whispered the Frenchman.

"I reckon we will give them a surprise they little anticipate. If there ain't more than a regiment of them we'll have some fun here, you bet."

Their surprise can be imagined when the opening door disclosed the beautiful girl wrapped in her dark cloak, the hood thrown back, revealing her glorious head around which the silver moonbeams seemed to play like a halo of light as in the pictures of the saints of old.

The two men stared in astonishment; and the girl, perceiving the drawn weapons, guessed the thoughts which her unexpected appearance had produced.

"Do not be alarmed!" she exclaimed, in the rich melodious voice which was one of her greatest charms, "there is no danger."

And, the moment she spoke, Blake knew that she was the masked beauty of the Fandango Hall.

But the other, more dull, did not recognize her, and the look of suspicion upon his face did not vanish even when he discovered that the intruder who came thus mysteriously in the silent watches of the night, or morning rather, was a young and beautiful girl.

Blake thrust his revolvers back into their holsters instantly; all near had vanished from his mind; but the Frenchman still kept his weapons in hand and peered anxiously out over the girl's shoulder as if he expected to discover assassins lurking behind her.

"Your word is quite sufficient, miss," Blake remarked, gallantly.

"I come to give you freedom; I am the daughter of the alcalde."

The face of Grandville brightened up at once.

"We will be a thousand times obliged to you, lady, if you can perform what you promise!" he hastened to exclaim.

But, not from his lips did the girl wish thanks, and she turned her glorious eyes inquiringly upon his companion.

Blake understood that he was expected to answer for both, so answered, smiling as he spoke:

"Well, miss, I am very much obliged to you, indeed; but, really, as far as I am concerned, I am not particularly anxious to get away from here."

The Frenchman made an impatient gesture.

"You are a strange man!" he exclaimed.

"You would laugh in the face of death."

"Perhaps; and isn't it as well to die with a smile on your lips, if die one must? But, as far as I can see into the lay-out, there isn't the least bit of danger," Blake replied.

"Oh, but there is danger!" the girl asserted, earnestly. "You have made an enemy of one of the most dangerous men in San Diego."

"What, that whipper-snapper?" cried Blake, in contempt.

"Yes, young and slight as he is, hardly more

than a boy in years, yet he has the soul of a demon; he is feared throughout the town. If reports are true, he is in league with the smugglers of Table Mountain, one of the most desperate bands of outlaws in all California, either Upper or Lower, and these outlaws are already prepared to aid him in anything that he undertakes."

But this warning had as little weight upon Blake as the empty whisperings of the breeze then stealing gently through the tree-tops. He laughed as he remarked:

"Why didn't the man introduce himself to me and tell me what a deuce of a fellow he was? Then I should have known how to carry sail, and, of course, I would have let him do his own sweet will—perhaps!" Despite the words there was in the speech that which gave them the lie.

"Come, come, we are losing time!" the Frenchman exclaimed, nervously.

Blake knitted his brows; he didn't like to see his companion "weaken" in this way.

"All is provided for your escape; the doors are open, no sentinel bars the way, and at this hour all the inhabitants of the town are buried in slumber, so that you can proceed not only without molestation, but without observation. At the clump of trees where you were captured two good horses are concealed; these are for you; and, once upon their backs, a single hour will make you safe from all pursuit."

Lovely as was the girl with her face in perfect repose, she was still lovelier now, her charms heightened by the excitement which pervaded her frame.

"It is good!" the Frenchman cried. "Let us go at once; there is no time to be lost."

"Yes, but hold on; I don't like this idea at all!" Blake protested. "This is too much like running away. I have always been accustomed to face my foes, and in this case I am not afraid. Let men who are guilty of evil-doing and who fear to meet examination, give leg-bail, but that is not the course that we should pursue."

"But you do not comprehend," the girl urged, anxiously; "you will not have a fair trial; there is a large party in San Diego hostile to all you strangers, and you will also have to face the wrath of these outlaws, who are in league with this young demon."

A smile played around Blake's resolute mouth for a moment before he replied:

"Miss, I don't want to underrate San Diego or its people, but, if we strangers, as you term us, should get our backs up once, it wouldn't take us long to clean out the town."

The Frenchman now was a prey to apprehension; dark fears filled his mind, and earnestly he begged his companion to accept the proffered assistance and fly at once.

"I've known many a man in my time to run right into death trying to run away from it," Blake grumbled, but at last he consented.

"All right; I will go; I agreed to go partners with you in this affair, and I reckon I don't want to boss the job all the time. I will allow it is your say—so this time, but, pard, I ain't hankering for it worth a cent!"

The girl, delighted, accompanied the two to the outskirts of the town and there parted with them.

"Adieu, señors!" she cried, "and my heart's best wishes go with you!"

"She's a trump and no mistake!" Blake murmured.

CHAPTER IX.

THE AMBUSCADE.

WITH a long, lingering look Blake gazed after the girl, as she hastened back into the town, and then, ere she disappeared, she faced around and waved her hand in a parting salutation.

"A trump, old man!" Blake repeated, half to himself and half to his companion, "and, somehow, I have a sort of an idea that that young lady and myself will meet again one of these days."

"Let us begone at once!" enjoined the Frenchman, impatiently. "I shall not breathe freely until we are out of this accursed town. I was mad to venture here again, but the gold tempted me; but of what use is gold if life must be bartered in exchange?"

"Not much use, pardner, but that is the game in this world. Go ahead; I am with you, although this move is very much against my judgment. My way in this world has always been to fight every obstacle that rose in my path, boldly and promptly, and no matter how great the danger a bold, brave front always makes it less."

"But, I am in an agony of fear every moment that I remain here!" the other cried. "I tell you there are dark shadows on my soul that sap my courage away; but, now that I am hastening from this, for me, ill-fated city, my spirits are rising. The blood of Carisee is upon my soul although I killed him solely in self-defense; it was either his life or mine, and I did not choose to be the victim."

"But, what has this youngster, Captain Volcano, to do with the affair?" Blake asked, as they walked onward. "As near as I can make out from your story, he could not have been

anything more than a child when the affair happened."

"I do not know—I do not understand that myself. Carisee had no son, and no relative in the world that I ever heard of, with the exception of a daughter—Juana she was called."

"And how old would that daughter be now?"

"Twenty or thereabouts."

"The same age as this captain."

"Yes, and she is probably his sweetheart, or wife, living in the town of San Diego, it is likely, and, by some strange chance, she caught sight of me when I landed and recognized me at once."

"I guess you have hit it, for that explains the whole affair. Does the daughter know of this secret mine, think you?"

"That depends upon circumstances," the other answered, and, as Blake fancied, a little evasively.

"What circumstances?" Blake demanded, for he didn't relish any half-confidence from the man for whom he had so freely risked his life. "It seems to me, pardner, that you ain't laying your hand out for me quite so freely as you ought to."

"I ask your pardon," said the Frenchman, perceiving that his companion was not well pleased. "It is my nature to be reserved. The circumstances are as follows: I am sure that Carisee did not reveal to a single living soul the secret of the mine which was known only to him and myself; but, after his death any one examining the body would have found upon it a puzzle, the solution of which revealed the secret of the mine, so if Juana was not skilled in puzzle-reading she could not possibly learn the secret."

"Now I understand, and a mighty mixed-up piece of business it is, too," Blake averred. "I reckon, though, as I said before, you are right about the girl; these women have deuced sharp eyes and awful long memories sometimes. No doubt she is in the town, somewhere, recognized you when you came on shore—you remember what a crowd there was when we disembarked, about all San Diego was there—knew instantly that you were the man who had killed her father, and put this fellow on your track at once; and, pardner, I think the chances are about ten to one that the daughter is posted on this hidden mine business, too."

"It is possible," the other admitted; "and in that case we shall have to fight all along the line."

"No doubt, judging from what has happened already, she will make it particularly warm for us."

"So great a prize is worth a desperate struggle!" the Frenchman assumed. Now that he was out of the town his fear—the terrible apprehension which weighed so heavily upon him—was passing away, and he was more like his own self again.

"There are the trees!" Blake observed, as the little clump of timber, where they had taken refuge before, rose in sight.

"Yes, but where are the horses?"

"Why, concealed within the timber, of course; a girl as smart as she is would not leave them out in plain sight where they might be picked up by the first straggler that came by. Horses are in demand now, you know, for mighty few of these gold pilgrims would be willing to hoof it to the mines if they could possibly borrow a horse anywhere."

And, just then, as if in answer to the Frenchman's question, a shrill neigh came from the center of the timber.

"The beast knows that we are coming."

"Yes, and in a few minutes we will be in the saddle and then it will be good-by to San Diego for a long time!" the Frenchman exclaimed, joyously.

"For you, yes, perhaps; but not for me, by a jugful," Blake rejoined. "I have taken quite a liking to that girl, and I am going to put myself considerably out of the way to see her. I have seen many a woman in my time, but none that has made the impression upon me that that old alcalde's daughter has; she is a very queen and no mistake."

"The gold is what I want, and when I get that I can buy women by the hundred!"

"Ah, but not such girls as this one."

"Oh, women are all alike, but I don't want her, nor anything else in this accursed town, which now I hope I look upon for the last time."

A hope destined to be gratified, for hardly had he uttered the words when a perfect sheet of fire poured forth from the shrubbery from the armed ruffians concealed therein.

With a scream of agony the Frenchman leaped bodily into the air and then fell dead, and down went Blake, too, around whom the bullets flew thick as hailstones in a thunder-storm.

Then out from the thicket rushed the assassins, jubilant over the success of their fiendish scheme.

Captain Volcano was at the head of the gang of ten well-armed ruffians.

"At last, at last!" he cried, with a demon-like laugh, as he contemplated the dreadful work. "He was mad to come back here, but

he forgot Juana, the daughter of a murdered father—he forgot that vengeance is ever sweet to one of southern blood."

"Can we strip 'em, captain?" asked one of the gang.

"Yes, go for 'em, but save those red revolvers for me; I need just such a pair of tools."

"Take the contents instead!" cried Blake, springing to his feet and at once opening fire on the astonished ruffians.

By a miracle almost the hardy adventurer had escaped death, nor was he even badly wounded, although hit in four different places but Blake was of the race of catlike men who seem to laugh at ordinary perils and pass unscathed through dangers which prove fatal to others.

Never were men more astonished than were the ruffians at this unexpected event. They had seen the two men go down; there was not one chance out of a thousand for a man to escape from such a peril, but that one chance had stood the adventurer's friend.

He had "played possum," and had fallen as though done for for this world.

Captain Volcano and his hired bravos had had "the drop" on the two seekers after fortune, and improved it to the best of their ability, but now their "bolt being shot," it was the Fresh of Frisco's turn.

He had them at a terrible disadvantage, although the odds were eleven to one against him, but their pistols were in their belts and they were totally unprepared for a desperate battle.

No red revolvers for Captain Volcano this time.

CHAPTER X.

THE PUZZLE.

As coolly as though in the practice-field popping away at glass balls Blake opened fire; and meant mischief, too, with every shot. The first man, a big, burly ruffian with the imprint of a hundred crimes upon his face, he dropped with a bullet in the head; the second, a yellow "Greaser," with the word murderer written on every feature, got a leaden pill in the heart, when, panic-stricken, the rest fled as from the very incarnation of death itself; and so great was their haste that they flung aside their weapons as though the pistols impeded their flight.

Four shots in all Blake fired, and each shot had leveled its man, closing forever the account of the rascals with earth.

Four out of eleven had fallen, and the other seven were running as they had never run before.

"Come back and fight it out!" the adventurer cried, in derision. "I ought to drop two or three more of them."

But it was too late now, for the rascals had got out of harm's way.

Blake watched them until all the party were fairly out of sight, hidden amid the shadows of the town.

"And now, who am I to thank for this little surprise?" he exclaimed, abruptly, as he turned and surveyed again the battle-ground. "Can it be possible that the alcalde's daughter had a hand in preparing this trap? No, no; I cannot believe that! That girl is truth and purity itself; if she is not then those two virtues dwell not in the breast of womankind."

Again the horses concealed within the timber neighed. Blake went and examined them; they were excellent ones, and all prepared for a journey.

"She has been betrayed by some servant to whom she intrusted the hiding of the horses, who was perhaps her confidant in the whole affair, but the villain was also in the pay of the Captain Volcano," and then suddenly before the mind of the adventurer rose the image of the old alcalde's cunning face, and Blake, although deeply interested in the daughter, had upon his first meeting with De Salvador set the smooth-tongued ruler of San Diego down for a scheming rascal.

"That is the man for my money!" he concluded, "the fellow who arranged this little affair, and it is with him I must settle, for I always calculate to pay any little debts of this kind."

But how could he square accounts with the father without injuring the daughter? It was a difficult problem that he did not care to solve now.

His thoughts turned to his companion, the unfortunate Frenchman.

"He was right after all," Blake murmured; "he came after gold and found a grave instead."

Examining the body he found that Grandville had been killed outright, upon the instant, and then to his mind came the remembrance of what the other had said in regard to the secret mine.

"He said that any one who had examined the body of Carisee would have found upon it a puzzle, the solving of which would have given any one a clew to the hidden lode. Now isn't it likely that he carries upon his person some clew to this mine, and if he does why shouldn't I possess myself of it? I have as much right to be

his heir as anybody, I reckon. This searching the dead is a job that I don't hanker much after, but if a man wants a gold mine worth ten or fifteen millions he must expect to have to do a little unpleasant work."

So Blake proceeded to make a careful and minute search; but it was a fruitless one; not a scrap of paper of any description could be found at all on Grandville's person.

Then the idea occurred that there might be a secret pocket where the important document was preserved, so again Blake researched, this time not neglecting a single square inch of the clothes, but again without success.

"Well, well, this beats me; the man must have carried the map in his head, so the secret of the mine has died with him, and it is good-by to all my hopes of acquiring a colossal fortune without working for it. The girl, Juana, though, may know the secret of the mine as the Frenchman suggested. I might hunt her up and offer to go in cahoots with her and so strike it in that way, if she would have me for a pard—which I doubt."

Just as he was about to arise his eyes were attracted to some peculiar tattoo marks on the breast of the dead man. In his search he had pulled aside the blue flannel shirt, exposing the brawny breast. The blue marks imprinted upon the skin, sailor fashion, and the way in which they were arranged, at once excited both his wonder and curiosity, while across his memory flashed the words of his dead pard in regard to the puzzle which carried with it the secret of the hidden lode.

"This is it for a hundred dollars!" Blake cried, exultingly. "This is a map of the region, together with instructions how to reach the mine! There it is, plain as the nose on a man's face when a fellow knows how to read it."

He now produced a little memorandum-book and a pencil and proceeded, as carefully as possible to transfer to a blank page the tattooed lines and marks on the breast of the unfortunate Frenchman. Then rising from his strange task he muttered:

"I'll go back to the calaboose again. Ah! if my partner had only taken my advice and stayed there he wouldn't—"

A heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PROPOSAL.

ALTHOUGH taken by surprise, for the newcomer, whoever he was, had approached so noiselessly that even Blake's keen ears had not detected the movement, the cool and ever-ready sharp did not start nor clutch his weapons; he merely looked up as if he had expected such a thing, and he beheld the pencil man, Nixey Weeden, as he called himself.

"Don't be skeered; it's only me, old side-pardner!" and the pencil man chuckled.

"Nary skeer!" Blake replied, replacing the memorandum-book in his pocket. But the sharp eyes of the uncouth fellow had detected what Blake had been doing, although he was of course in the dark as to why he did it.

"Taking a description of him, eh, so that his friends can identify him one of these days, maybe? Well, that ain't a bad idee. I say, pardner, you made a bully fight of it! I have seen a good many leetle fusses, but this hyer one beats all I ever did see. You jest laid 'em out, bully!"

The man had made himself so conspicuous on the day of the trial as to attract the prisoners' attention, but Blake had barely given the fellow a second thought, taking him to be one of those loud-mouthed vagabonds so common to the far West—men who will say more in a minute than they will stand to in a week.

"Oh, you were a witness of the skirmish?"

"You bet!" with a grin. "You see I was asleep out yonder in the bushes and the sound of the popguns woke me up. I kinder h'isted a leetle more fire-water last night than I had any room for, and arter I got the cargo aboard I got so big that thar wasn't a shanty in this hyer town large enough to hold me, so I camped down in the bushes over thar. I tell you, stranger, you're a chief and no mistake. I never see'd men laid out so quick and so keefully in all my born days. Say, stranger, I reckon you are jest the man I have been looking for."

"Yes?" a little suspiciously.

"Yes, sir-ee! I have a leetle job on hand that you will fit jest as if you had been measured for it. Are you open to jine?"

"Well, that depends upon what the job is."

"Oh, it's a risky one to tackle and it wants a man with muscle and grit, but you are jest the critter to fill the bill. Will you h'ist in?"

"I must know what the job is first; I am not in the habit of going in blindfold."

"Right you are, brigadier! That is the way to hold your own, and that is what I say; hold your own! Jumping Jerusalem! hold your own, and if you can't do it, take a brick! Come along with me and I will introduce you to the boss."

"Hold on, my friend and backer; you are a little too fast. I am not anxious for a job and I must know something about the affair, before I take any steps in the matter."

"Oh, you needn't be a mite frightened; it is all squar' and aboveboard!" the fellow declared. "I am going to play a squar' game with sich a sharp as you, every time, you bet! Do you know these fellers wot jumped on you and laid your pard out hyer?"

Blake did know them, for the captain and his gang had felt so sure of killing their prey that they had not taken the slightest trouble to disguise their persons.

"Oh, yes, I know them well enough."

"And so do I, and a healthy gang they are, you bet! They allers try to hold their own, every time, and they take a brick, too. Well, now, this leetle wrinkle is, the boss that I am a-working for wants to clean out this Captain Volcano and all his gang, and he's got the law on his side, too. You had better come and see him; 'twon't do no harm, nohow, even if you don't make a trade."

True; it would do no harm to look into the matter; but who was the man who desired to lay the bold Captain Volcano by the heels, and for what reason?

"You are a-going to try it, eh?" asked the pencil man, eagerly.

"I will see the man you speak of and have a talk with him as soon as I get out of this scrape."

"What scrape?"

"Why, I am supposed to be in jail now, awaiting trial. I came out because an avenue of escape seemed open to me, but it was only a trick; if I had had my way, I would not have come, but the Frenchman was eager to get out, and as he and I had agreed to play partners for a while, I yielded to his wish. It was fate; he rushed to his death in spite of me, but I am going back to the jail to stand my trial, and after that is over, then I'm your man."

"Good enough! I will be on hand, but I reckon the galoots won't care to put in an appearance arter the way in which you salivated them."

"I reckon not, but, who knows?" and Blake started on his way.

The pencil man gazed after him for a moment, a look of admiration upon his hard features.

"That feller has got more sand into him than ten-cent sugar. He's jest the chap we want to clean this gang out," then his eyes happened to fall upon the bodies of the ruffians who had fallen by Blake's hand. "But, he ain't got as keen an eye to business as he ought to have or else he would have gone through these galoots and relieved them of their wealth. I reckon I kin attend to that business right up to the handle."

And the bummer was as good as his word, but he did not profit much by the operation, for the bravos' pockets were nearly empty.

Blake went directly to the town; he found the door of his prison-house locked so that he could not get in, and while he was debating upon what was best to do, his attention was attracted by the loud snoring of a sleeper who was coiled up in a neighboring doorway. He went over and examined the man, thinking that his person looked familiar. It was the jailer sleeping off the effects of the strong liquor with which the alcalde had plied him, so as to render easy the escape of the prisoner.

The man had the key of the calaboose in his pocket, and Blake possessing himself of it, unlocked the door, then replaced the key in the pocket of the sleeper.

"I fancy the alcalde knows how I got out," he murmured, as he entered the prison and took possession of his old quarters, "but I reckon it will bother him to tell how I got in."

And with a mind free from care, Blake laid down upon the little bed within the room and slept.

Captain Volcano, after the bloody defeat at the hands of the sharp, went directly to the alcalde's house with the thrilling tale.

"He is a devil—a perfect devil!" the alcalde cried, when the captain had finished his recital, "but now, I guess we are rid of him."

"At a terrible cost though; four of my best men are done for," the captain remarked, gloomily.

"Oh, there are plenty of men to be had, but you finished the Frenchman?"

"Yes, and we ought to have finished the other, and we surely would have done so if he had not as many lives as a cat."

"But one thing you have never explained to me; what grudge had you against this Frenchman?"

"My dear alcalde, that is my secret, and now that the man is gone it must die with him," the other answered.

"Oh, certainly; I don't wish to pry into your private matters; I only asked it out of mere curiosity, that is all; but, by the way, when does the Fair Isabel sail? Isn't it about time that you made a landing down yonder? You have a rich cargo on board, this time."

"Yes, the richest I have ever had: it will net us all a pretty sum, this time. I shall get away to-morrow night. I have been waiting for the mules to get back; and then, too, I received a warning that an endeavor was to be made by the officers to intercept me this time, and I have been waiting to see the scheme develop."

"How is the attempt to be made—by sea or land?"

"By sea, so the report said, and I have had spies out all along the coast, but so far no government vessel has been seen."

"Ah, well, if she doesn't put in an appearance to-day you are all right."

"I think it is a false alarm, but I will have the cargo on shore by midnight."

The pair parted, and the alcalde retired to rest again, only to be roused from his slumbers, a few hours later, in the early morning, by the jailer rushing in with the intelligence that one of the prisoners had escaped during the night.

"One!" yelled the old alcalde, sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes in astonishment.

"Yes, señor," replied the jailer, "one—the Frenchman—is gone."

"And the other one—the American?"

"Oh, he's there all right, and when I asked him what had become of his companion, he said it was my business to find out."

"He is a demon fresh from Hades!" cried Salvador, in supreme disgust.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GREEN DOLPHIN.

THE alcalde was in a quandary. To let the American go was like turning a wild beast loose, and yet how could he still keep the man in durance vile? Public sentiment was already pretty well worked up about the matter. The gold-seekers, a large and influential class—in fact the masters of the town, if they chose so to be—considered the arrest an outrage and would make trouble if he attempted to carry out any high-handed measures; so he must let the fellow go, but, couldn't he, in some way, arrange the matter so that future trouble might be avoided?

The more the alcalde pondered, the surer he felt that he had wit enough to accomplish this, and after a half-hour's reflection a scheme that again involved Margerite took shape in his mind.

So, that morning, at the breakfast-table, he told his version of the affair to the unsuspecting girl.

"The jailer has been here," he said.

"No doubt astonished at the escape of the prisoners," she remarked, smilingly.

"Yes, but he reports that only one has escaped."

"Only one!" Margerite exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Yes, the Frenchman."

"And the American?" and a peculiar light shone in the girl's dark eyes as she put the question.

"He is still in the prison."

The face of the daughter showed the amazement which she felt.

"I think I can guess why this thing is as it is," the alcalde added. "The American is a peculiar fellow and the thought of fleeing in the night like a thief was distasteful to him, so he concluded to return and face it out."

"He will be in danger then; father, you must save him!"

"I have not been idle, my dear; I heard the news at daybreak, and since that time I have accomplished much. I have seen Captain Volcano, who has most cause to feel aggrieved, and he has consented not to appear and press the charge against the American."

The proud lip of the girl curled disdainfully as she listened to this intelligence.

"Indeed, father, I should think if any one was wronged it was the American, for the quarrel was commenced by Captain Volcano, and the treatment which he received at the hands of the American was really no more than he richly deserved. The man with the red revolvers is a remarkable man," and the beautiful eyes glowed with feeling.

"Of course I don't know anything about the affair excepting what the captain has told me. Having got the worst of the affray he naturally considers that he is the injured party," the old man answered, in his politic way.

"For once in his life he met his master if he never did before."

The alcalde, watching the girl narrowly, plainly detected the fact that his daughter had become deeply interested in the dashing adventurer, and the idea annoyed him greatly, for it was no part of his scheme to allow a love affair between the two to spring up.

"I must now get him out of the way, at all hazards," he muttered, under his breath, as he rose from the table. Then he mounted his horse and rode directly to the calaboose. Dismounting he marched into the prisoner's presence.

He found Blake engaged in disposing of a good breakfast. The adventurer had bribed the jailer with a dollar to procure him something better than the bread, beans and water of the prison fare.

"Good-morning, señor," accosted the alcalde, pleasantly.

"Good-morning, alcalde; a thousand years of life be yours," the prisoner replied, with true Spanish politeness.

"You are alone?" and the old man cast a searching glance around, as though he expected to see the Frenchman hiding in some corner.

"No, not alone, alcalde, unless indeed you count yourself nobody," was the captive's reply, dispatching the last of the coffee as he spoke and winking at the official over the edge of the tin cup.

"And where is your companion?" the Californian asked, not apparently noticing the witicism.

"Why, you know well enough," and the speaker fixed his keen eyes on the face of the other.

"I know?" and the look of astonishment that the old man assumed was really a success. "I know?" he repeated, apparently pondering over the words as though unable to realize their meaning. "What should I know about the matter? I have been told by the jailer that your companion succeeded in escaping during the night, and I have come on purpose to find out how he managed to escape; and I must own, too, that I am very curious to learn why you did not accompany him."

"Alcalde, you are just wasting your breath!" Blake retorted. "You can't pull the wool over my eyes; I am up to all your little games; I know that we were led into a trap last night, and with your connivance."

"Upon my word, señor, you wrong me greatly!" the Californian declared, earnestly.

"Why should I wish to injure you? You are a perfect stranger to me; there is no motive, and men do not act without motives in this world."

"Very well put indeed, alcalde, but I have a very strong suspicion that you and this Captain Volcano whom I have had the luck to rub against are on very good terms."

"Oh, I know the man of course, and, to tell you the truth, I am not very partial to him, as he has an unpleasant, swaggering way with him which is very distasteful to me as the chief magistrate of the city," and the alcalde lowered his voice as though afraid that some one might overhear the confession.

Blake nodded, but the expression upon his face showed that he did not believe the statement.

"But now, to speak of yourself," continued the Californian, "why did you not accompany your companion?"

"You know that I did!"

"Well, well, we won't dispute about that; it is of no importance; I am ready to admit that you did; but why did you return? I should have thought you would have improved the opportunity to get out."

"Why should I fly? I fear no man," Blake answered, calmly. "I am here to stand my trial and I do not fear the issue."

"But the friends of this Captain Volcano are terribly excited against you."

"No doubt about that, but the gallant captain hasn't as many friends this morning as he had last evening," the American suggested.

"You see I am placed in a very unpleasant position," the alcalde continued, paying no attention to the sarcasm of the other.

"Some of your men are in a worse one."

"The two horns of a dilemma confront me; if I push the case against you, I shall incur the displeasure of all of your countrymen, and they are not an agreeable set of men to get along with at the best; on the other hand, if I do not push the case, then Captain Volcano and all his friends—all the natives of the town—men whom I have known since childhood—will be enraged at me. Now then, you can get me out of this huddle."

"I can."

"Yes; get out! You are bound for the gold mines, go; what is the use of your lingering here? You have no business in San Diego; be gone, levánt!"

"Not by a jugful!" decidedly. "Here I am and here I will stay until I am legally released. I am no criminal to fly!"

The alcalde turned upon his heel and quitted the room without a word. His little game had failed.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW DEPARTURE.

THE alcalde ground his teeth in rage as he departed, so signally discomfited.

"May the fiend fly away with the rascal!" he muttered; "we cannot do anything with him, and the best thing for us will be to let him alone in the future. We cannot make anything by attacking him; nothing is to be gained except revenge, and that will not pay for the risk that must be run. The only thing to be considered is, will he be satisfied, or will he consider that he has been wronged and attempt to right the matter? Caramba! it is not he that has suffered, but us. True, we killed the Frenchman, but see how many lives the affair cost us! He has no right to complain; he should be satisfied."

And then, to the mind of the alcalde, came thoughts of Captain Volcano. Would he be satisfied? It was extremely doubtful. It was the first time since the gallant captain had made his appearance in the town of San Diego that he ever had been compelled to show the white feather; would he be satisfied, then, to let the quarrel stand as it was without

seeking to take vengeance upon the foe who had humbled him?

Twenty times, as the alcalde proceeded on his homeward way, was he stopped and questioned regarding the prisoners, and, although a few of the questioners, old citizens of the town, and bitterly opposed to the inroads of the gold-seekers, declared that the rascals deserved to be hung, yet they always qualified their opinion by remarking that they supposed it would not be possible to do anything with them, with such a horde of savages in the city, lest it might lead to the sacking of San Diego, so the official plainly perceived that, in the event of trouble, he would receive precious little backing from the Californian element.

As for the fortune-seekers, they were loud in their denunciation of the arrest of the two men, and they did not hesitate to make known their sentiments to the alcalde in the freest manner possible.

It was quite plain there was no other course open to him but to retreat from the false position in which he had placed himself, as gracefully as possible.

The judgment hall was crowded when the alcalde opened his court that morning, and as he took his seat and looked around upon the rough-bearded, resolute-looking fellows who filled the apartment, he fully comprehended that, if he did not deal generously with the prisoners, the chances were there would be trouble.

The trial was a mere farce though. Blake was brought in by the jailer, who reported that, in some mysterious manner, to him unknown, the other prisoner had escaped during the night. The alcalde went through the form of telling Blake that he was accused of an assault with intent to kill, and asked him whether he was guilty or not guilty, to which, of course, Blake replied that he was not guilty. Then the alcalde called for the accusers to step forward, and the crowd began to glare and scowl and handle their weapons; but no accusers made their appearance, which was a fortunate thing, surely, for them.

As there were none to make accusations, the alcalde was compelled to discharge the prisoner, which he did in a speech, carefully worded, expressing his great satisfaction that the affair had terminated so pleasantly.

Blake was the hero of the hour, and half a dozen parties, ready to start for the interior, pressed him to join their force, but, as he said—he had other fish to fry, which was taken to imply that, not satisfied with the treatment he had received, he intended to "get square" with his assailants before he left town.

Taking advantage of a favorable opportunity, the pencil man whispered in his ear:

"Be on the beach to-night, just after dark, and I will take you to the man who wants to make a trade with you."

Blake nodded; this promised a new adventure, which just suited the man's impatient, restless spirit.

At the appointed time Blake sought the beach. The pencil man, all curled up in the stern of a boat drawn up on the shore, was apparently asleep, but, "with one eye open," for the moment Blake appeared he lifted his head and called:

"Hyer you are, old man!" then hopped out of the boat and cast a suspicious glance up and down the beach, remarking: "I allers make it a rule to keep my eyes skinned and my ears peeled for these durned yaller Californians; they are p'isoned snakes, and as sly as 'possums. Jump in!" the pencil man continued, sending the boat into the water with a vigorous shove.

Blake complied; then the other got in, took the oars and headed seaward.

Through the darkness shone the lights of the vessels anchored in the harbor—just three of them—the Fair Isabel, Captain Volcano's craft, the large schooner in which Blake had come, and a small fishing-sloop, of some ten tons burden. This fishing-boat was owned in the town—the Green Dolphin she was called, and she was as well known to the inhabitants as the alcalde himself. She was anchored at quite a distance from the others and much nearer the mouth of the harbor.

The pencil man, seemingly well acquainted with these particulars, pulled for the sloop; and he evidently was expected, for the moment he came alongside a score of eager hands assisted the two men on board.

There were twelve or fifteen men on the deck, all resolute-looking, well-armed fellows, but not in the least resembling sailors or fishermen.

"The General is in the cabin," said one of the men, when, acting as guide, the pencil man conducted Blake down the companionway.

It was a spacious apartment for so small a craft, and by a table in the center, busily engaged in writing, sat an imposing-looking personage, who, although carelessly and roughly dressed, had a lion-like head, bold features, while the bronzed face was ornamented with a most magnificent mustache and imperial.

The title which had been bestowed upon him, "General," fitted him completely, and Blake set him down as some high official in the Mexican service.

"This is Mr. Blake, General," announced the

pencil man, "warranted to whip his weight in wild-cats or no sale! Mr. Blake, General Barragan."

Blake bowed, while the General rose and cordially shook hands with him.

"It is delighted I am, sur, to be afther having the pleasure of making your acquaintance!" exclaimed the supposed Mexican, in the richest and ripest brogue that ever rolled out of the mouth of a son of old Ireland.

Blake, although not easily surprised, was so in this case, and staring at the other, expressed that surprise in a look which the General understood at once.

"Aha! it bothers you, does it, me bye? Well, you are not the first man that has been kilt entirely by hearing a dacent English—or Irish rather—tongue in this haythen land!" the General observed, with a laugh. "The fact is, you see, my name is Barry Agen, but whin I came to this country in search of fortune, which I have found, bedad! the yaller byes twisted it into Barragan, and that has a foine foreign sound, do ye mind."

"Yes, I see."

"But now to be afther getting to business," the Irish-Mexican continued. "I have the honor to be in the service of Mexico, and my superiors have ordered me to be afther putting down these rapparees of smugglers who are afther making ducks and drakes of our trade. This Fair Isabel, bad luck to the likes of her! is one of the worst in the business, and I have certain information that she has a mighty rich cargo on board, and that she intends to make a landing to-night. So I have jist chartered this craft; and as I have a fine lot of byes on board I propose to be afther slipping out and laying in wait for me bold bucks off Table Mountain, and whin he comes we'll be afther boarding him as lawful prize. Now thin, will ye take a hand in the fun? We need jist sich a man as you to lade our byes."

The wild fever for adventure which burned ever in Blake's veins prompted a ready acceptance of the offer. Here was a chance, too, to get even with Captain Volcano!

A half an hour later the Green Dolphin extinguished her light, and glided quietly out of the harbor.

CHAPTER XIV.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

"I AM no sailor, you know," Blake remarked to the General, as they ascended to the deck after the sloop got under way.

"Oh, that is all right, me bye," responded the officer, in the rich, musical brogue which sounded so strangely coming from his bearded lips. "The captain here is the finest sailor that ever shook a leg on salt water."

"Ay, ay, my hearty, I reckon that I know all the p'ints of a seaman's trade as well as any man that ever took a trick at a wheel!" exclaimed an extremely disreputable-looking old salt whom the Mexican official had introduced as the captain of the craft.

Blake, remarkably quick in "jumping to conclusions," at once decided that the "captain" was a worthless, drunken old salt, with not discretion enough to be trusted with the command of a yawl boat, let alone a craft bound on such a desperate enterprise as the present one seemed likely to be. He was under the influence of liquor then, and even if when sober he understood how to handle a boat, it was evident that he wasn't in any condition to handle a craft in his present state.

Drawing the General aside Blake spoke in regard to the captain's condition.

"Oh, that is all right, me bye," the Irishman responded. "It is a foine healthy taste that he has for liquor, and the more he gets into him, do ye mind, the better man he is."

Blake was not satisfied with this assurance. As a supporter of one end of a bar in a liquor-saloon the captain might be—undoubtedly was, the right man in the right place, but to be placed in charge of such a desperate venture as this only proved to Blake's mind that the Irish-Mexican was a man of little discretion.

The adventurer's attention was then called to the "foine byes" whom he was to command, and he was at once introduced to them as their leader; and as nearly every one of them had witnessed his prowess in the Fandango Saloon, right joyously they welcomed him as their chief.

The men were well enough—as good food for powder as could be commonly picked up, and Blake in a few words placed himself on a familiar footing with them. Then "ways and means" were discussed. The Irish renegade had a pet idea which he felt sure would succeed, and the old sea-dog, as in duty bound, approved the plan, which in truth was a very simple one. The sloop was to run outside, go down the coast below Table Mountain—then beat up and down until the smuggler craft made its appearance, and the moment the Fair Isabel was discerned in the gloom, bearing up for the anchorage off Table Mountain, the sloop, accidentally, of course, was to run her down and the moment that the two crafts were afloat Blake and his men, who were to conceal themselves by lying down

flat on the deck, were to spring aboard the smuggler and overpower her crew.

"Isn't it a fine scheme, me bye?" Barragan exclaimed, proud of the little plan.

"Oh, yes; it is a good plan enough if it will only work," responded Blake, a little doubtfully.

"In course it will work!" cried the sailor, in the most confident manner possible. "Dash my tarry eyes if I can't lay the Dolphin alongside of that 'ere t'other craft so slick that they will never know it is done."

Despite this confident assurance Blake did not for an instant believe that the ancient mariner could do anything of the kind. The smugglers had the reputation of being good sailors and the adventurer did not believe that it was possible for them to be caught napping in this easy way; but, as owing to his ignorance of the sea, he was not able to suggest any better plan, he was compelled to hold his peace. If the captain could manage to entangle the two vessels so that the smuggler craft could be boarded, Blake did not doubt of the right issue.

The men were rather disposed to be noisy, all being more or less under the influence of liquor, but Blake put a stop to this.

"Not a word above a breath," he commanded. "Voices travel a great distance over the water, and the smugglers on shore are certain to be on the look-out; at the first sign of danger they will display some signal warning the Fair Isabel to keep off," and in obedience to his further command all stretched themselves out upon the deck in various positions, striving to make themselves as comfortable as possible until the time for action came.

Although the night was "thick," yet, as the sloop ran down along coast, the bold outline of Table Mountain was plainly discerned, but the General was careful to warn the old salt, who was taking a trick at the tiller, to keep well out, so that no sharp-eyed look-out upon the shore could detect the spectral-like craft gliding along in the gloom. Particular precaution had been taken that all lights on board of the sloop should be extinguished.

The sloop ran well down below the mountain; then coming about, began to beat up.

"She was to weigh anchor just an hour after we started," the General announced, in Blake's ear, "and as she is a much better sailer than this craft, we ought to meet her very soon. This gloom upon the water is favorable, for when we blunder into her they will hardly be able to detect that it is not accident, do ye mind, and I will go bail that the first intimation they do be after having that anything is wrong will be when ye spring upon their deck wid the min at your back."

From what he had already seen, Blake had come to the conclusion that, whatever else his failings might be, Captain Volcano was no fool, and did not believe he would be caught in this trap.

Blake's eyes had been fixed intently upon the shore—the great black cloud-appearing mountain-side; and just as the General finished he detected the glimmer of a light there. He instantly directed the attention of the General to it.

"Do you see that?" he asked. "That is a signal, sure!"

"Oh, yis, and that manes, 'all right, the coast is clear,' no doubt."

"Very likely, and as they know exactly when to expect the Fair Isabel it is probable that she is not far off."

"Light ahoy!" sung out the look-out in cautious tones, who was posted on the bow of the sloop.

"Whereaway?" growled the old salt, in true nautical style.

"Straight ahead!"

"We're all right then, and we'll go for the lubber," replied the skipper, who by this time had caught sight of the light, and was steering directly for it. "You see, gov'nor," he remarked, confidentially, to the General, who was standing by his side, "we'll lay our course right straight for him, and the first thing the lubber knows we'll be right onto him. In course he will yell for us to go to the larboard, jest as we ought to do so as to pass him, but, instead of that, I'll jam my helm up hard-a-port and then will put us right on board of him, and then your bully boys must attend to the rest, 'cos that ain't in my line; I'm here as a sailor and not as a marine."

It really looked as if the plan must succeed, for, thanks to the light displayed by the Fair Isabel, the sloop could make out where she was, while she herself was hidden by the gloom of the night.

"There's another light displayed on the mountain-side," Blake announced.

"They see the light on the vessel and it is an answer to it, do ye mind? That manes all right ag'in," the General explained.

This seemed plausible, for, hidden as she was by the darkness, and displaying no light, detection seemed impossible.

More and more visible grew the light, and Blake passed the word along the deck to prepare for action.

The old sailor had been watching the light with calculating eyes.

"In jest about two minutes we'll ketch sight of each other," he remarked.

Everything seemed favorable, when, at the culminating moment, one of those unlucky accidents which set at naught the most careful calculations occurred.

One of the men, "fooling" with his revolver, accidentally discharged the piece, the report ringing out loudly over the waves as, through the gloom, the white canvas of the Fair Isabel began to loom.

This shot warned Captain Volcano of danger near, and he was prompt to meet it. Putting his helm hard-up he performed upon the Green Dolphin the same trick which the acute Irish-Mexican had designed for him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE TURNS.

THE unfortunate discharge of the pistol so exasperated both the commander of the expedition and the pilot that for the moment they forgot all about the near proximity of the smuggler craft and devoted themselves heartily to cursing the blundering, therefore the skipper not being on the watch did not detect the clever movement of Captain Volcano until the Fair Isabel was almost upon them, and then it was too late to do anything.

Crash came the sharp prow of the Isabel, cutting into the Green Dolphin's quarter and smashing the side of the old, weather-beaten craft like an egg-shell.

For a moment the two were fast, for the cut-water of the smuggler had been carried away and some of the chains had become entangled in the broken timbers of the other vessel, but soon she swung clear and passed under the stern of the Green Dolphin.

As the Fair Isabel had come down upon them all of the adventurers on board of the other craft had sprung to their feet and as a natural consequence, not being sailors and not being used to the sea, the shock had upset them and they went rolling over each other, swearing and howling in delightful confusion, and some of them rolled into the water, their despairing cries and yells as they plunged into the briny wave being horrible.

Blake was shaken from his feet by the violence of the shock like the rest, but quickly recovered himself, and drawing one of his trusty red revolvers he clambered on the bow of the smuggler's craft, yelling, "Boarders, ahoy!" as he sprang down upon the deck of the Fair Isabel.

Just then the vessels swung clear, as we have described, and Blake, looking around him, saw that a single man only had followed his bold lead, and that was Nixey Weeden, the pencil man.

There were ten or twelve men on board of the vessel besides the commander, Captain Volcano, all well armed, three or four of them with guns, and they all were clustered "aft," around a little brass piece, from which the water-proof cover which always concealed it had been removed. The cannon was trained so as to sweep the deck and the gunner stood by the piece ready to pull the trigger.

The moment Blake saw this gun he knew the game was up; and yet, with his natural audacity, he seemed ready for fight.

"It is of no use, cockscur!" warned the pencil man in the ear of Blake; "they have got the drop on us and we had better squeal!"

"Surrender! Throw down your arms, or I'll blow you into atoms!" cried Captain Volcano, who had recognized his foe and comprehended what had occurred.

"Surrender? You bet!" answered the pencil man, promptly; "but I ain't got any weapons to throw down; I ain't heeled!"

And the shrewd fellow was not. Discovering the true situation and the gun as he dropped on the deck, it was too late then to retreat, for the vessel had swung clear; so, to insure good treatment, he slyly tossed his weapons into the water.

Blake hesitated for a moment; it went terribly against his wishes to surrender, but, gracefully bowing to the necessity, he placed the famous red revolvers down upon the deck and then laid the long, straight, keen-edged bowie-knife which he always wore at his waist beside them.

"Pardner, the game is yours and I pass," he remarked.

"Pick up the tools and search the other man," the captain commanded, an order at once obeyed despite the remonstrances of the pencil man.

"Tain't the least bit of use to s'arch me!" he protested; "I ain't got even a toothpick. Oh, I'm squar, I am!"

"Bring up a couple of pairs of handcuffs," the captain now ordered.

"Say, you ain't going to put handcuffs on a cuss, are you?" the pencil man demanded, while Blake folded his arms in silent resignation. He was fairly in the toils, and he knew that, at present, resistance was useless.

The handcuffs were brought up and applied to the wrists of the prisoners.

"Take them down below!"

The discipline on board of the Fair Isabel was excellent, for every order was executed

promptly. The prisoners were removed, Nixey Weeden protesting indignantly against such treatment.

They hurried him below, though, and then the captain turned his attention to the other craft.

She had been so badly injured that she was sinking fast, and the frightened men were crying out to take to the boats.

"We must make the lower landing," said the captain to the next in command, "for these fellows will make straight for the shore, and give us trouble. Display the signal that we will make the other anchorage."

The smugglers had everything reduced to a system. One lantern ran up the masthead signified that the Fair Isabel would come to anchor at the first landing; two lanterns at a time, sent up twice in rapid succession, meant that she would land at the lower anchorage, some five miles further down the coast.

The answering signal, which was but a repetition of the one given by the vessel, displayed upon the shore showed that the sign was understood.

"Now, pull in to the shore, you meddling fools!" cried Captain Volcano, shaking his fist at the sinking vessel, "and much good may it do you. You will find Table Mountain, but you will not find the prize which you seek."

Straight down the coast went the craft, and the smugglers on shore, warned by the revolver-shot, as well as by the ones that came over the water, for the two crafts were only about a half a mile from the shore when the collision occurred, also by the signal of the vessel that something was amiss, mounted their mules, which they had in readiness, and hurried southward, to meet the vessel.

This time the Fair Isabel made her anchorage without interruption, and the captain's first care was to see that the prisoners were safely bestowed.

The first boat that made the shore carried Volcano, four of his best men, and the two captives, securely handcuffed.

To the old smuggler chief the captain addressed himself:

"They laid a trap for me, this night, but I was lucky enough to escape it, and to catch two of the principal men concerned in it. I want you to have them sent to our mountain stronghold, so that I can examine them at my leisure."

"All right, captain, I will attend to it," the other replied, and he did so, at once, while Volcano proceeded to attend to the unloading of the cargo, and the stowing of it away on the backs of the pack-mules, preparatory to the overland trip.

The two captives, notwithstanding they were securely handcuffed, were fastened together by a strong lariat, and their feet were so hobbled that they could walk, but not run.

Several of the band were well acquainted with Blake, having encountered him on the two occasions when Captain Volcano had sought to accomplish his death. They speedily told their companions what a man of war was their captive.

As for the loud-tongued pencil man, the crowd greatly wondered to see him in such company, for he was looked upon as an idle vagabond, hardly worth the powder and shot that would kill a squirrel.

Up along the mountain-side, with many a turn and through many a rough defile, the party went, until at last it halted in a secluded defile, high up along the side of Table Mountain, where, hidden under the shade of some giant trees, a few rude cabins stood, from the doors of which a view of the great Pacific could be commanded.

This was the home of the outlaws.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DEN OF THE MEDICINE-MAN.

ABOUT a quarter of a mile from the limits of the town of San Diego, on the road leading to the north, was a little clay hut hidden under two small trees. This hut was occupied by a man who was quite an object of interest to the people of the neighborhood.

He had made his appearance mysteriously, coming from no one knew where, and had taken up his abode in the little hut, which had been long ago deserted by human inhabitants.

The man was an Indian, apparently, to judge from his color, and the fact that no signs of a beard appeared upon his face. He had once been tall and straight, but now he was bent almost double with age and infirmities. In person he was singular looking, for his hair was silver-white and flowed down over his shoulders almost to his waist.

The appearance of this odd creature of course excited a great deal of curiosity even in this wild country, where strange humans are not at all uncommon.

The greater part of the time the old man spent stretched out in the sun in front of the hut, like a huge lizard, and when the sun did not shine he kept closely indoors and was not visible. By night he roamed abroad, and was often encountered in some wild spot digging up herbs by the light of the moon; this practice led the people to believe that he was a medicine-man, as the

Indian doctors are called, but of what tribe he was a member, or why he had chosen to leave his brethren and come to dwell amid the tents of civilization, was a mystery.

Of course he was questioned—there are gossips everywhere, even on the verge of the frontier—and the truth was soon discovered. The man was a little "touched in the upper story"—a harmless maniac, in fact, who believed that he was a great medicine-man in the truest sense of the word, not only being able to cure all the complaints that human flesh is heir to, but also able to communicate with the unseen spirits of the air and predict the good or evil fortune fate had in store.

And the old fellow, lunatic though he was, had a very quaint and taking way of telling fortunes, too. He had a good-sized blackboard, probably acquired by the red braves in some frontier fray when an old-time mission-house was raided, and on this blackboard, with a chalk pencil, he depicted the decrees of fate, for the man was really a natural-born artist, and the effect which he produced, by a few simple strokes of the pencil, was quite wonderful.

Cajo he said his name was, and, when questioned regarding his tribe, shook his head and said that he had none—that he was a white man.

This, of course, every one knew was nonsense, for it was quite apparent that he was an Indian, and why he had quitted his tribe was accounted for in a dozen different ways. He had doctored a great chief and killed instead of curing him, or he had predicted evil fortune to the tribe. The bad luck had come, and, because the medicine-man had predicted it, he was held to have had a hand in producing it, and so, to save his life, had been obliged to fly like a thief in the night.

But the tribe from whence he had come was a puzzle, for, although he was in full Indian rig, the dress was fashioned in such a peculiar manner, and so unlike any Indian costume, that the wisest plainsman was not able to say positively in regard to Cajo's nation.

It was night and the moon was up full and bright; a horse and rider came galloping along the road which led from San Diego past the hut of the conjurer.

The horse was one of those common clay-bank mustangs so often met with on the lower coast, and the rider was a woman closely cloaked and veiled, as though she feared recognition.

She drew rein at the hut of Cajo, leaped from her horse, and, approaching the door, tapped lightly on it with the butt of her riding-whip.

The door at once flew open, and Cajo appeared.

"This is the hut of Cajo, the conjurer?" she asked, in low, sweet tones.

"I Cajo, conjurer," the Indian replied, after the broken fashion common to him.

"I wish to try your art."

"Me know; me wait for you to-night; me know you would come," the other replied with the most perfect gravity.

The woman gave a slight start, and through her veil she stared earnestly in the face of the old man.

"Me know you would come long time ago," he continued. "Me been reading the stars; me know what you want; s'pose you come in."

The woman hesitated for a moment; then bowed her queenly head. Since she had come so far upon the quest she was not going to falter now.

Into the hut she went, the old man holding the door courteously for her to pass, and then he closed it carefully behind her and put up the bar.

She watched him, but was not alarmed; for, underneath her cloak, her firm right hand grasped a little silver-mounted six-shooter which she was brave enough to use if necessary.

Through a large opening in the roof the bright rays of the round full moon stole into the room, making the apartment almost as light as by day.

Placed so that the full light of the moon could fall upon it was the blackboard upon which Cajo worked his mysteries.

The old man waved his visitor to a seat, a low stool, the only piece of furniture in the room, with the exception of the bunk-bed, built out of boughs, in one corner.

The lady seated herself, when the conjurer seized his chalk pencil and sketched a few rapid lines upon the black surface exposed to the full light of the moon. Rapidly and coarsely as the work was done, yet the likeness was excellent and would be recognized anywhere instantly by any one in the slightest degree acquainted with the man. The old alcalde was represented to the life.

A murmur of surprise came from the lady's lips; she was amazed both at the skill and knowledge displayed by the Indian.

"A bold, bad man!" exclaimed the conjurer, sentimentally.

"Oh, no; it is not so! I know it is not true!" she exclaimed, impulsively.

"You are a child; wait; with years will come wisdom," he replied; then he effaced the picture of De Salvador and soon another form grew out under his skillful hand, and this like-

ness was equally as good as the other, and again a cry of amazement escaped from the lips of the lady. The figure of Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, appeared upon the blackboard!

"See! it is of him you come to speak."

Bright and burning blushes were upon the maiden's cheek, which the heavy veil concealed; but in spite of her efforts she could not repress the emotion which trembled in her voice.

"No, not of him but of myself I come to speak; it is my own destiny I wish to know, if your art is equal to the task."

"The line of your life and his life-line are tangled up together," the conjurer announced, pointing to the figure of Blake.

"And what has the future in store for either one or both of us?" she asked, trembling with anxiety in spite of herself.

The old man at once effaced the picture of Blake and then rapidly sketched another in its place.

Again the likeness was wonderful and the lady quickly recognized it.

"It is the Frenchman!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, who was killed by the weight of the secret which he carried in and on his breast."

"A secret?"

"A secret—a terrible one, which, so far, has proven fatal to all who have possessed themselves of it," the old wizard exclaimed, in the voice of a prophet. "Go to this wild young man, this stranger to this land, and tell him to beware!"

"To beware of what?"

"Of the secret which he in part discovered when he bent over the Frenchman's dead body."

"Is he dead?" asked the girl, in wonder.

The death of the man who had been hunted so closely to his grave was known only to the men who had slain him and to Blake. Before morning came, when the deed was done, the outlaws had returned and removed all evidence of the bloody strife which had taken place near the little clump of timber.

"Murdered because he knew the secret!" the old man repeated, solemnly. "The clew to that secret is now in the possession of this bold blade who fears not a hundred foes. Seek him; say to him that it is at the peril of his life if he attempts to solve the puzzle of Carisee."

"The puzzle of Carisee!" the girl reiterated, not able to comprehend this mystery.

"Yes; he will understand; do not lose any time, for if he once succeeds in learning the secret no power on earth can save him from a sudden, violent and bloody death." It was a remarkable fact that the conjurer was using the most perfect English now, without the slightest trace of a foreign accent.

"But where will I find him? Has he not left town?"

"The moth returns always to the flame that attracts him, no matter how great the peril."

Again under her veil the girl colored to her temples. Well was it for her that her face was concealed.

"He will come back—come back very soon; he will not be able to remain away; your eyes are the loadstones that attract his soul."

"I will warn him, and here is for your pains." She tossed him a gold piece and departed. She mounted her horse and rode rapidly away, unconscious of the dark figures following on her track.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN OUTRAGE.

THE girl rode straight for the town, swiftly at first, but as her mind became occupied with the strange thoughts which came crowding upon it, she involuntarily slackened rein, and the mustang, a fat, overpampered beast and very much inclined to be lazy, finding that it was left to its own devices, came gradually from a canter to a walk, which the rider heeded not, so intense was the fit of thought upon her.

Following the dictates of a whim she had sought the aid of the old conjurer, whose marvelous feats in the way of fortune telling she had frequently heard extolled. Unlike what some girls of her age would have done, she did not attempt to hoodwink herself into a belief that she was not interested in the handsome, daring stranger who had played so prominent a part in the events which had followed her visit in disguise to the Fandango Hall.

Nay, more: she felt that she took more than a passing interest in him, else she would not have sought her father and attempted to free the young man from the toils into which he had been entrapped.

Much food for reflection, too, had she when she remembered the manner in which the Indian sage had spoken of her father, the alcalde. The old man had accounted for Blake's return to the prison from which he had been freed by the girl's aid in the most plausible manner.

His story was that Blake and his companion on their way out of the town had, accidentally, come in contact with Captain Volcano and his friends, and as a natural consequence a fight had followed, but Blake had succeeded in beating off the assailants, and then had determined to return to the jail and fight the thing out, alone.

Of course in this adroit manner of covering up his share in the transaction no blame could be attached to the alcalde, but now that the old Indian had spoken, a lurking suspicion began to rise in the mind of the girl that it was possible her father was not pleased at the interest which she had manifested in the young stranger, and that he would do all in his power to break off the intimacy. She knew that the alcalde favored the suit of Captain Volcano, although it was reported and commonly believed that the captain had dealings with the smugglers of Table Mountain, but in the eyes of the easy-going citizens of San Diego this was not regarded as being particularly detrimental to a man's character, especially if he was lucky enough not to be found out.

But the girl had a horror of the man when she thought of him in the light of a lover, yet could not for the life of her account for it. The captain was young, good-looking, rather too proud and arrogant perhaps, but he had always put himself out of the way to appear to the best advantage in the eyes of the maiden whom he desired to please, and so his haughty, domineering way had always been modified in her presence. Many a time had the girl attempted to reason with herself in regard to the matter. She sought to put in words why it was that she disliked—fairly hated him—when he tried to play the lover to her; when he did not, she rather liked him, as he was very pleasant, an entertaining companion, and the minutes always passed swiftly away when he was near.

It was a strange, peculiar thing, and the more she puzzled over the matter the more dark became the mystery. Why should she like the captain as a friend and yet have such a dreadful horror of him when he assumed the guise of a suitor? She could understand what the feeling was like, well enough; it was as if a brother should attempt to play the part of a lover; this she knew, but why it should be so she could not comprehend.

Absorbed in these dreamy and not over-pleasant thoughts, for she fancied that in her case the old proverb would surely come true, "True love never runs smooth," she gave little heed to her surroundings, satisfied that the pony would carry her straight home, as he had done a hundred times before when she had yielded to the subtle influence of these day-dreams, and so it was that the pursuers who had tracked her to the den of the conjurer, and, concealed without, had waited for her to come forth, were able to approach quite close to her without exciting her suspicions in the least. The hoofs of their horses were muffled with blankets, so that they gave out no sound, and the first intimation of danger the girl had was when one of the men, advancing quickly, threw a heavy cloak over her head; and almost at the same moment the fellow on the other side dextrously fixed a gag in her mouth; then the first man, who was of gigantic size, and mounted upon a horse well built to carry the weight of its owner, wound a lariat around the slender form, binding her arms tight to her body; this done, he bent over in the saddle, lifted her from her mustang and placed her before him on his own horse. The third man who had kept in the rear at once rode up and took the rein of the pony.

So skillfully—so successfully was the whole thing done that Margerite was not afforded time to utter a cry from the moment when she first felt the cloak descend upon her head to the instant when she was lifted from the back of her own steed and clasped with a grasp of iron to the brawny breast of the gigantic ruffian.

The deed accomplished away the party went at a great speed; they circled around the town and took the southern trail leading toward Table Mountain. There was very little danger of the abductors being interfered with, as there was very little travel after nightfall either into San Diego or out of it, and therefore the chances for the girl's rescue were very slight.

Not a single soul did the party meet, and they entered the wooded trail beyond the town with the certainty that they would not be interfered with, and indeed well-armed and desperate ruffians as they were it would have taken quite a force to have rescued the maiden from their hands.

Along they rode, pushing fast over the wild and broken country, a perfect wilderness in every respect. Up the sides and around the flank of Table Mountain they went, and did not draw rein until they came to where the cabins of the smugglers were clustered under the trees in the little plateau on the seaward side of the mountain.

Then they halted, dismounted, and removing their fair captive from her horse placed her in one of the cabins, which had evidently been prepared for her reception, for it was quite comfortably furnished and a candle was burning on the table. The small windows, though, were barred with heavy shutters, and there was a good strong lock upon the door; it was a prison all the same.

The men removed the lariat, the gag and the heavy cloak, and again the girl had free use of her senses. She had borne the rough journey

Captain Volcano.

with wonderful fortitude, and although very pale was calm and composed; in truth, Margerite de Salvador was a woman of nerve.

The abductors had expected a torrent of questions, an outbreak of feminine wrath followed by a flood of tears, but, on the contrary, the maiden simply looked around with her brilliant black eyes as if to discover where she was, then she turned to the ruffians, who were astonished at her behavior.

"Where is your master?" she asked. She had rightly conjectured that the men who had abducted her were but the tools of a more powerful mind—the hands that executed the work planned by another.

"He will be here in an hour or so," responded the giant, quite respectfully, somewhat awed by the girl's demeanor.

"Send him to me as soon as he comes," she said, with the air of a queen, and surely any one who heard her speak would never for a single moment have imagined that she was a helpless captive.

The men withdrew, taking particular care to lock the door behind them.

For a good two hours the girl remained alone, no living soul coming nigh. She sat as motionless as a statue by the rude table which was in the center of the apartment, her arm resting upon the table and her hand pressed against her throbbing forehead.

Vainly she racked her mind to guess who had perpetrated this daring outrage. The first name that came to her mind was Captain Volcano, but, after a few moments' thought, she dismissed the idea as being unworthy of belief. Why should he attempt such a thing? It was not possible he could be silly enough to think he could by the committal of such an outrage succeed in inducing her to look with favor upon his suit, and the proud lip of the girl curled in contempt at the very idea. She would die rather than yield an inch; force had no terror for her soul. But, the most plausible idea was that she had been abducted for the purpose of forcing her father to pay a ransom for her safe return. Such a crime had been committed before, along the Californian coast. Her father was known to be rich, and common report gave out that he was far wealthier than he would admit; desperate men, anxious to make a "stake," might reasonably suppose that by abducting the daughter, the anxious father could be induced to come down with a good big sum for her safe return. And San Diego now was filled with just such fellows—men on their way to the mines but lacking the means to go on, who would not be likely to hesitate at any chance whereby they might put money in their purse.

At first the girl was sure that she had hit upon the right idea, but—these men were not strangers: they were Californians, natives to the soil; she could easily tell that by their appearance. Had some road-agent band then sprung up, and was she destined to be the first victim?

Two hours, as we have said, she wrestled with these gloomy thoughts; then the tramp of many a hoof she heard without, and a few hoarse voices sounded on the air.

The rusty key grated in the lock; her heart beat quickly for she knew that a few moments would solve the mystery.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ABDUCTOR.

WITH almost breathless eagerness Margerite waited for the appearance of the man, who she suspected held her fate in his hands.

The door opened and Captain Volcano walked into the room!

A half-suppressed cry came from the girl. She was surprised; although, at first, she had suspected that the captain of the Fair Isabel had had a hand in the affair, yet, upon reflection, she had dismissed the thought as being not worthy of belief.

But, here was the captain in person, and there wasn't the least doubt about the matter now, and Margerite, gazing at him with flashing eyes, bestowed upon him a look which would have disconcerted any ordinary man. The captain, though, was not in the least moved by it; indeed, he laughed, as if the whole affair was a good joke, and, helping himself to a chair, sat down on the opposite side of the table, and stretching his legs out in the most comfortable manner, surveyed his captive.

The indignant girl could not restrain her anger any longer.

"And so it is you, Captain Volcano, who has committed this vile deed!" she exclaimed, angry fires sparkling in her dark eyes.

"I plead guilty, without the slightest hesitation," the captain replied, a mocking smile upon his beardless face, which was almost as fair as a woman's.

"And why? What earthly reason induced you to commit such an act—an act that severs the friendship which has always existed between us forever?"

"Ah, now you have hit upon the reason when you speak of friendship. Friendship does not satisfy the ardent longings of my soul," the captain remarked, in the coolest way imaginable. Indeed, he had always been the strangest

kind of a lover, and if at times he had not spoken too plainly to be misunderstood, the girl would never have dreamed that he was an admirer, he acted so entirely different to the other young men who sought to win her smiles.

"If you are trying to turn friendship into hatred, then, most surely, are you adopting the right course!" Margerite cried, in lofty contempt, the assurance of the man irritating her. "Oh, no, that is not my intention. It is your love I seek, not your hatred."

"If that is your object, you are mad, then, to lend yourself to this outrage. Do you think you can win the love of such a woman as I am by carrying her away by main force?"

"How should I act to win your love?" the captain provokingly inquired.

"If you have not wit enough to answer the question, I am sure I will not assist your stupidity," was the spirited retort.

"No doubt, no doubt," the other remarked, as if pondering over the question. "I have tried my best to win your love. I have sought you—paid court to you in the most persevering manner, and, like a crab, I seem to advance backward only. I have sued to you as I never before sued to a woman, for I am not one of the kind of men much given to love affairs."

And this was true and had often been commented upon; from the time when he had first made his appearance in San Diego he had manifested, not exactly an aversion, but a pronounced indifference to the charms of the opposite sex, which was something to be wondered at, when it is considered that the master of the Fair Isabel was of the very age when passion's fires rule strongest in the heart of man, and the hot blood leaped lightest in the veins. Until he met the alcalde's daughter Captain Volcano had never favored any other woman with even a second glance, but to Margerite he had taken a liking and from the day on which he had first encountered her, by his open attentions he had avowed himself her suitor, although, as we have stated, he acted toward her in such a singular manner sometimes that the girl was really perplexed to account for it.

"I should judge that you were not much versed in the ways calculated to win women, or else you would never have perpetrated this outrage!" Margerite exclaimed, with biting sarcasm.

"Perhaps you are right; but, as I have told you, having sued in vain, I began to despair of ever being able to touch your heart, when a bright idea flashed upon me. In San Diego, surrounded by a crowd of flatterers, all anxious to bask in the light of your smiles, my merits were obscured; but if I could succeed in inducing you to come to some secluded spot, where this crowd of butterflies could not follow, little by little I might win upon you and induce you to look with more favorable eyes upon the humble suit I proffer."

"You are mad—you are mad!" the girl cried, hurriedly, aghast at this announcement. "Do you think that a woman's love can be won by abducting her by brute force under cover of the darkness as if she were an Indian squaw?"

"Yes, I know it is rather unusual," the captain replied, laughing, and displaying a set of teeth so small and so white that even a ball-room queen might envy their fortunate owner.

"Unusual!" retorted the girl, in a fury of anger—the manner of the man acting upon her as an irritant; "oh, you have clearly taken leave of your senses. In the first place by this bold, bad act you have earned my hatred; as long as I live I shall never either forgive or forget the outrage, and then, in the next, do not for a moment believe you will be able to keep me here; long ere this my father is probably alarmed at my absence and with his friends is earnestly searching for me; in time he will find me, for he is rich, and San Diego will assist him to a man."

"Yes, and your gold-seeker friend, this hero of the red revolvers, will also, in all probability, raise the strangers to join in the search," the captain suggested, carelessly, but close watching the face of Margerite; and as expected the mention of the adventurer did thrill the girl, and she showed that she was affected despite her powers of self-control. The sight was as wormwood to him. "Oh! you are quite sure that he will follow on the trail, eager to ascertain what has become of the woman who flung herself at his feet and begged for his love like the slave of an Eastern despot, the moment he appeared in San Diego!"

Again the maiden's face flushed, but she did not deign to reply.

"And, as for your father," continued the captain, finding that she did not intend to speak, "he will not come in search of you, for I have provided against that. The Fair Isabel, my vessel, sailed from San Diego after dark this night, and I have so arranged that he will suppose you are on board."

Margerite betrayed amazement at this announcement, but there was a strong expression of disbelief on her face.

"You do not believe that?"

"No, I do not."

"It is the truth, though; one of my sailors, a man well known to your father as an honest

and trustworthy fellow, waited upon me last night, after my vessel was well out of harbor, and told him that you were on board, and that you had sent a message by him."

"Oh, what infamy!" cried Margerite, in terror.

"And the message the sailor delivered, as coming from you, was: 'Forgive me, father; I have eloped with the man I love, Captain Volcano, and at the first Mexican port where his vessel lands a holy priest will make me his wife; then I will return!'"

"Oh, you villain!" The captive could hardly find words to express the anger which now filled her soul.

"And thus, with his apprehensions lulled to rest, why should your father seek for you?" the captain asked in mocking triumph. "You know very well that he favors my suit, and always has favored it since I first began to pay you court. He will be delighted to think the elopement has taken place, and he will not think strangely of it, for you are noted for your impulsive ways and odd, romantic notions; if you were not so odd you never would have gone in disguise to the Fandango Hall. Of course the idea of the elopement—of flying by night with a man whom you could have married openly in the broad light of day, without any one to say nay, is ridiculous, but girls of your romantic nature do just such things. Your father, of course, will publish the news abroad, regarding it as a good joke that you should run away with the man whom he was only too anxious for you to marry; so, before noon to-morrow, for the sailor has been instructed to spread the news abroad, all San Diego will know that you have fled with me."

"But it is a cruel lie!" Margerite exclaimed. "Surely there must be some honest men on board of your vessel who will know that it is not the truth."

"What is not the truth?"

"That I willingly fled with you; they will know that I was not on board when the ship left the harbor."

"How can they possibly tell? You came on board secretly, and of course kept yourself concealed from all eyes; but to-morrow morning, as we sail southward, you will grow tired of remaining below and you will come on deck."

"I come on deck!" gasped the girl.

"Yes, and then all eyes will see you; you are not on board of the craft now, of course, but you will be before midnight. I am only waiting for the men to unload, then I have promised them a carouse on shore, and while that is going on I will have you smuggled on board. You will be placed in my private cabin, of course, and then, when we make the Mexican port, you can marry me or not at your own sweet will; but one thing is certain, after your trip with me the odds are great that none of the rest of your suitors will care about wedding you."

For a moment the girl was speechless, her breath coming thick and hard, then at last she found her tongue.

"Beware if you do this! I will kill you though I hang for it a hundred times!" she cried.

"It would be sweet to die by such beautiful hands," and then he rose, bowed gracefully and retired.

CHAPTER XIX.

BLAKE'S FATE.

ON the outside of the cabin the old smuggler chief waited, and the captain at once joined him.

"Well, what luck? How does she take it?"

"Like an angry tigress," the captain replied, with a laugh. "She swears that if I carry out my little plan she will kill me."

"I shouldn't be surprised if she had it in her; reputation is sweet to such a girl as she, and the way you are going to work will tarnish her forever."

"And that is what infuriated her, particularly since she is compromised with me, the man she hates."

"Yes, and that is one thing I cannot understand!" the old smuggler exclaimed, bluntly; "what on earth do you want with a girl who cannot bear the very sight of you? I don't see, even if you succeed in all you undertake, where you are going to get much pleasure or comfort out of the affair."

A peculiar expression appeared upon the handsome face of the captain, an expression which was often there, and which no living mortal had ever yet been able to translate.

"All men to their humors," he replied, quietly; "you have yours and I have mine, and so have these fellows down yonder," and he pointed to the men, who, busy as bees, were engaged in unloading the precious cargo of the Fair Isabel. The moon was beginning to rise and afforded light for the smugglers to work, and from the spot where the two stood, the open plateau in front of the cabins looking to the sea, a full view of the scene could be commanded. "By midnight they will all be drunk as lords and correspondingly happy; that is their idea of enjoyment; it isn't mine, for any kind of liquor, good or bad, is as medicine to me. You do not

Captain Volcano.

can't get any liquor but you will sit down to a meal and play from sundown to day-break, or while you have a coin to stake; that is your humor, but I enjoy gambling no more than the drinking. To humble this haughty minx who has laughed to scorn all my efforts to win her—why that is a game worth playing."

"It is at the risk of your life though," remarked Sabino, warningly.

"Bah, what is life? Is it worth the constant struggle that we have to make to retain it?"

"Well, you appeared to think so the other night, judging from the speed you displayed in retreating from this devil of an adventurer when he peppered us so well!" the smuggler chief retorted.

Volcano laughed; he was fairly hit.

"Oh, I yielded to the panic of the moment, and I ran like a hare, I own, and yet I don't set a great value on my life."

"But, what are we going to do with this fellow? We have got him safe enough, but now the question is how to dispose of him. He would be invaluable to us if we could only persuade him into joining our band."

"I am afraid we will not be able to accomplish that, but we can try. Let us see him at once."

The two immediately proceeded to the cabin where the redoubtable Fresh of Frisco had been placed, together with his companion, the long-tongued, loud-mouthed pencil man.

Although the prisoners were securely handcuffed, the cabin door guarded by a stout lock, and the two little windows in the sides of the cabin securely fastened by shutters, yet, as a matter of precaution, the captain had been careful to station a couple of sentinels on the outside.

The two guards were stretched out on the ground in front of the hut, smoking their pipes, not at all sorry to exchange the toilsome task of unloading the Fair Isabel for their present easy job.

"All right within?" the captain asked, the guards rising to a sitting posture as the two leaders approached.

"Oh, yes, as quiet as lambs," one of the men answered.

"Ain't heard even as much as a mouse stir," the other assented.

"Probably they have laid down and gone to sleep," Sabino suggested.

"Or else up to mischief and planning an escape," Volcano remarked, always suspicious.

"I reckon it would bother them a heap to git out of this hyer," the first man, a big burly fellow with a scraggy beard, remarked, with a complacent look at the strong door that guarded the entrance to the cabin.

"Yes, and it will be a ticklish job for them to git off those pretty little bracelets that we put on 'em," the other observed. "I know, 'cos I'm a judge of sich things. I've had 'em on my wrists, and they ain't easy things to git out of; and then, if they did get rid of the darbies and got out, I reckon that Bill and me would make mince-meat out of 'em quicker than you could bite a chaw off of a plug of tobacco." And the ruffian slapped his hands upon the butt of his revolvers as he spoke; yet this boasting braggart had been the first fellow to take to his heels on the night of the attack, when Blake, single-handed, had routed the whole gang.

"Is there a light within?" the captain asked.

"There's a candle on the table but it isn't lighted," the big fellow answered.

"That will do then; I have some matches."

The key was in the lock; Volcano turned it, opened the door, and followed by Sabino, entered the prison room. All was still within, no signs of life at all.

A sudden and fearful thought occurred at the same moment to both the men. Perhaps the prisoners had escaped! Quickly the captain lit the candle upon the table, and, greatly to their relief they saw both men stretched out upon their respective bunks.

They had been asleep, evidently, but the noise outside had awakened them, and at the lighting of the candle they arose to a sitting posture and looked inquiringly at the new-comers. Both were still handcuffed, but the lariats which had bound them had been removed.

The pencil man, seeing who his visitors were, began to beg for mercy, and to protest that he had never done any one any harm. Now the captain had formed a very decided opinion regarding the bumner some time before, and that was that he was a Government spy, employed by the Mexicans to hunt down the smugglers. So, calling to the two men outside he directed that Nixey be thoroughly searched. If he was a custom-house spy in the Mexican service it was likely that he might have some important papers concealed upon his person.

The prisoner was, thereupon, taken outside, and when the door closed upon him, the captain turned to Blake.

"Well, sir, it is my turn this time, I think," he remarked, gazing with curious eyes into Blake's expressive face.

"There isn't the slightest doubt that the cards are running in your favor pretty strongly just

now," the sport answered as unconcerned as though his life did not hang upon the issue of the game.

"You see luck will change."

"Oh, yes, I know that; and it won't do you any harm to remember it, either." Volcano understood what he meant, but went on:

"What was the object of this attack to-night?"

"Why, you ought to know; it was you that ran us down."

"Simply anticipating the purpose of the commander of your craft, and, by the by, who was the commander?"

"I pass."

"You do not know?"

"It isn't polite to ask questions," Blake retorted.

"Were you the chief?"

"Nary chief!"

"You will not answer then and give me the information I seek?"

"Sir, you expect altogether too much pork for your shilling," the other returned.

"Well, I don't think any the worse of you for keeping a still tongue in your head," the captain observed, after a moment's pause. "And now we have a proposition to make to you. Although, as it has so happened, we have been placed at enmity, yet I am willing to let bygones be bygones, if you are."

Blake laughed and held up his fettered wrists.

"I have some very good and particularly strong reasons for agreeing with you on that point," he replied.

"In fact I bear you no animosity."

"I am delighted to hear it, and as the first proof that concord reigns, suppose you remove these little ornaments, which, notwithstanding their beauty, are far from being pleasant," and Blake nodded significantly, as he spoke, to the handcuffs.

"You will join our band then? We need just such a man as you are. We will make a good position for you; you shall be the third man in the organization, ranking after my friend and myself. The chances for fortune are great."

"And the chances of being shot or hung by the authorities equally so, I presume," Blake rejoined. "You really must excuse me; I prefer to play a lone hand."

"You are choosing death!" cried Volcano, in a tone of menace.

"Maybe," in the most unconcerned way possible.

"You shall have until to-morrow to think over the matter."

"The greater the time the better," assured the captive.

The two then withdrew, and the pencil man was brought in. The search had been a failure.

"They have left the light, by jingo!" the bumner cried. "Now if I don't show 'em a trick afore morning I'm a Dutchman!"

CHAPTER XX.

A USEFUL CACHE.

AND, true enough, the light had been left! The candle was a very small one, not enough to burn over an hour, and that was probably the reason why the captain had not taken the trouble to extinguish it.

The pencil man had managed to pick up a good deal of information during the brief time that he had been outside, and he speedily revealed all that he had ascertained to his companion.

"There's going to be a jolly blow-out arter they git the vessel unloaded; the captain has promised to give the men a keg of whisky if they succeed in getting everything on shore and on the pack-mules and the train started before midnight, and they will do it easy, too, and an hour or so to spare. The two fellows outside are mad as hops 'cos they are compelled to stay hyer and watch over us. You see, when they were put on guard they didn't know anything about this blow-out, and when one of the gang, who came up when I was out there, told them 'bout it they were mighty well riled, for it ain't often that the chance comes along for a man to fill up on whisky free, gratis, for nothing; but, they have got beads on their shoulders, both of them, and they fixed a trick so as to get a whack at the fun. The captain, it seems, allers gits out of the way when these drinking rackets commence, for he don't take to 'em at all, so they are going to watch their chance, and when they see the captain git, one of 'em is going to sneak down and fill a bottle and then sneak back and the two fellows can have a quiet drunk all by themselves."

"If we could only get these bracelets off, and then find some way to get out, we would be able to get off very easily, although I would have to leave my red revolvers behind, and that goes decidedly against my grain," Blake remarked.

"They have got us in here pretty tight," Nixey confessed, with a dubious shake of the head, and a careful, searching glance at the strong shutters which guarded the windows.

"The situation looks almost desperate. In the first place it will be impossible to get these handcuffs off, and if that was accomplished, to force a way out would puzzle us, without mak-

ing noise enough to arouse the gang, even though they are pretty well steeped in liquor."

"The chances are a hundred dollars to a slap on the back, that these galoots outside will be as drunk as fiddlers in thirty minutes arter they get hold of that bottle of whisky!" Nixey averred.

"All that allowed, what good will it do us, shut up here with these infernal irons on our wrists?" Blake demanded. "I am a pretty strong man, but not strong enough to break these beauties."

The pencil man winked one of his eyes; then, looking carefully around the room, stole noiselessly to the door and listened. He could hear those on the outside conversing, although he could not distinguish what they were saying. But it was proof that they were not intent on watching their prisoners.

All of a sudden a series of yells pierced the air. It was easy to guess what that denoted; the smugglers had finished their task; the Fair Isabel was unloaded, the goods packed upon the mules, and the caravan was ready to set out; work was over and fun was about to begin.

The shrill cries of the mule-drivers rung out on the air; the smugglers favored them with a parting salute of yells, and then the stillness that followed seemed to denote that the whisky keg was being tapped.

As the two men on guard had expected, the captain, after the carouse began, retired and left them to their own devices.

The sentinels kept an eager watch upon their leader, and, after he was out of the way, one of them stole down and joining the laughing, drinking throng, managed to fill a bottle with the potent liquor; then, returning with it to his companion, the two stretched themselves out upon the ground and prepared to engage in a drinking bout.

Regular old soakers, both of them, and men not easily fuddled; but the bottle held whisky enough to fill them up pretty well, and as the fluid was of the rawest, vilest kind, and especially doctored with all sorts of stuff to conceal adulteration and to give it the true frontier bite, it was not long before even their strong heads were affected.

With his ear glued to the keyhole, Nixey tried, by patient watching, to discover how they were getting along, and, as the whisky mounted into their heads, they became more and more talkative, and less guarded and louder in their conversation.

The bottle was finished and they hungered for more, so the one who had remained on guard at first volunteered to go and get a fresh supply.

By this time the carouse was at its height, and he had no difficulty whatever in getting the fluid, and no one thought of questioning in regard to why he had left his post.

When he returned his companions received him with open arms, and again they attacked the common enemy.

"If that durned old candle will only last twenty or thirty minutes more we will be out of this hyer place as sure as you're born!" Nixey muttered, half to himself and half to Blake.

But, sitting on the bunk and watching the movements of the other, the sport hadn't the remotest idea in regard to the accomplishment of this feat, although the pencil man seemed to speak with all confidence.

As the carouse went on the gang had become extremely noisy, but now the discordant sounds were gradually dying away, sure evidence that the potent fluid had done its work.

The two sentinels now deeply under the influence of "the ardent," lost all caution, as they talked so loud that it was easy for the listening pencil man to overhear every word.

"Blast my boots!" exclaimed the big fellow, "if I ain't as sleepy as though I hadn't a wink for a month."

"Is that so?" responded the other, sympathetically; "well, now, if that ain't the oddest thing in the world. I feel just as fresh as if I had got out of my bunk this min'te," and yet the fellow was blinking like an owl in his struggle to keep his eyes open.

"Blamed if I wouldn't give a hundred dollars for about ten min'tes' sleep," growled the giant, which was rather an extravagant offer, considering that he didn't have ten cents in the world, having been thoroughly cleaned out that afternoon in "bucking" against a monté game in San Diego.

"What is to hinder your having a snooze, anyway?" demanded the other. "Who is a-going to know anything about it? I shan't peach on you."

"Them fellers in thar might git out," and as he spoke the man struggled with a yawn that threatened to dislocate his jaws.

"How in blazes kin they—handcuffed and the door and windys fastened? Go to sleep, ole man, and I will keep watch for you."

"All right; wake me up as soon as the captain comes," responded the giant, as he stretched his huge limbs out in a comfortable position, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

"The captain come, not much!" murmured the other, as he followed his comrade's example. "He's off, sound as a top; and so are the galoots in there, I will go bail. What is the good

of watching two sleeping men, handcuffed and locked up, too?" And the man soon was safely locked in slumber's chain.

More and more eagerly the pencil man listened when the sound of voices ceased; for a time all was quiet; the candle was burning low in the socket, and within ten minutes would be out.

Then came the sound for which the watcher had been listening for so earnestly. A long-drawn snore; a second snore followed the first. The two braves were having a snoring concert together.

"And now, me bonny brave, since the coast is clear we will give leg-bail!" cried Nixey, in delight.

"More easily said than done I am afraid," Blake returned, for he did not see how escape was possible.

"They searched me, you know!" Nixey reminded him with a chuckle, "but I wasn't born yesterday, and I reckon I am up to a thing or two."

Then he took off the coarse and heavy shoe which he wore, the right foot shoe, and proceeded to unscrew the whole thick and clumsy sole. It really was a cunningly-contrived box which held a complete set of skeleton-keys, fine saws, little gimlets and a pair of "nippers."

"The saws we don't need this time," he observed.

From the box he selected a small key, applied it to the lock of Blake's handcuffs and it fitted. Blake, freed from his bracelets, did a like favor for his companion; and now all that remained to do was to unlock the door. With the aid of the "nippers" this was easily performed. The key was in the lock on the outside and the nippers applied on the inside laid hold of the key and turned it around with ease.

The avenue of escape was open, for only the two sleeping, drunken men were in the way.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BOLD STROKE.

THE way of escape was open, but, despite their reckless hardihood, both of the men were well enough versed in the dangers of the frontier not to throw away a chance.

The handcuffs removed and the door unlocked, the pencil man carefully replaced the "tools" in their secure hiding-place which his wit had contrived for them, then he screwed on the sole of the shoe again and was ready for action.

From the cabin door the two fugitives glided to the shelter of the nearest trees, so that partially concealed they would have a chance to survey the field.

The two sentinels were stretched out by the door, one on each side of it. One of them, the big fellow, had extended himself at full length on the ground; the other sat propped up against the hut; and both were making night hideous with their snoring.

Not a sound came from the rest of the gang, although their dark forms could be plainly distinguished stretched out upon the ground in the open place where they had held high carnival. Not a sentinel was posted, for there was little danger of any surprise in that mountain fastness.

The way of escape seemed open, and the fugitives could not conceive of any accident likely to prevent making their way back to San Diego.

One of their first glances after getting clear of the cabin had been seaward, in search of the ill-starred "Green Dolphin," but she was not in sight; either she had not been as badly damaged as was at first supposed, and had sailed northward, bound for San Diego, giving up the pursuit of the Fair Isabel as a bad job, or else the damage had been sufficient to sink the fishing-craft.

The Fair Isabel was in plain sight, riding at anchor, and so close in to the shore that her deck was plainly visible to the fugitives from the elevated position which they occupied; and not the slightest sign of life was there to be seen on board the smuggler craft.

The same idea occurred to both of the men at the same instant, and as they looked at each other, each saw that the other had caught the inspiration.

The spot upon which they stood was, according to the best of their knowledge, some fifteen or twenty miles south of San Diego; it was a long and tiresome journey to the town, and they were ignorant of the way, but by sea the course was plain enough.

In brief, the idea which had simultaneously occurred to the fugitives was to take the small boat, which they could see drawn up on the beach with the oars in it, board the Fair Isabel, cut her cables and put to sea. It was really a glorious scheme; not only would they escape from the power of the smugglers but they would also carry off in triumph Captain Volcano's pet and joy!

There was only one obstacle in the way, according to Blake's thinking, and he immediately made that known to his companion.

"You have got my idea, eh?" he queried; "you think of seizing the vessel and escaping in her?"

"My idea to a hair," the pencil man replied, with one of his peculiar grins. "Ain't that turning the tables on them with a vengeance, and it is a following out my motto, too: hold your own; never mind whar you are, or what you are up to, hold your own, and if you can't do it take a brick!"

"There is only one thing that interferes with it as far as I can see and that perhaps only applies to me; it is easy enough to get away with the craft, and it would be a rough old joke on Captain Volcano and his gang, but it will be like the man who stole the locomotive; after he had got it, he couldn't manage it."

"You ain't no salt-sea sailor, eh?"

"Nary time; dry land is my best bolt."

"Well, I am; and you kin bet your boots on it, too!" was Nixey Weeden's assurance. "I kin take my trick at the wheel or go aloft with the best of 'em, and I don't keer what color eyes the cuss has got, either."

"But can two of us manage the craft?"

"Twill be a leetle short-handed, but at a pinch it kin be done," the other replied, confidently. "We have only got to run up the coast a few miles or so, the night promises to be calm, with only jest wind enough to send us along, so I reckon that there won't be much danger anyway."

"It's worth trying, so if you think you can manage her let us try the raffle."

The pencil man took a good long look at the craft; she was not large, a sloop; and two men in calm weather could handle her as well as a dozen.

"Do you reckon that thar is anybody on board of her?" he asked.

"I think it very likely; in fact, I think the chances are big that Captain Volcano is asleep in the cabin and one or two more of the leaders of the gang, perhaps."

"By Cain! wouldn't it be the biggest kind of a joke if we could succeed in carrying off both the vessel and the captain? That would be getting the drop on him like thunder."

"I don't see any reason why it can't be done, except that the noise of getting the anchor and sails up might awaken them; then of course they would be apt to show fight."

"I kin fix it slick as a whistle. You take the tiller and being right at the cabin door, if any one attempts to come up, the moment they open the door you kin blaze away at them. I will cut the cables and get up the jib; she will do well enough for a time with the jib alone; then both of us kin salivate whoever is on board."

"We will need arms. I guess we can strip these fellows without waking them."

"Sartin! They are sleeping like logs."

The two at once proceeded to attempt this feat which they succeeded in accomplishing without trouble.

Again they cast cautious glances around them, and then with stealthy steps stole like specters of the night down to the shore.

The boat upon the beach they lifted noiselessly into the water, and embarking, they paddled with extreme caution out to where the Fair Isabel, swinging at her anchor, was floating upon the bosom of the placid tide.

The approach to and the boarding of the craft was the dangerous part of the enterprise. If anybody was on the vessel and they were alarmed before the two got on board then the chances were very much in favor of the smugglers, for it would be a difficult thing to board and capture the Fair Isabel in the teeth of a hot fire.

"We'll go under the bow and climb on deck by the chains," the pencil man whispered, as they cautiously approached the vessel. "If anybody is on board they are bunking in the cabin of course and they won't be apt to hear us at the bow."

Blake nodded assent. The boat glided under the bowsprit; Nixey tied the painter to one of the bow-chains while Blake with catlike agility and caution scrambled to the deck—the pencil man following immediately.

"Now you go aft and take the tiller; keep her straight seaward while I cut the anchor-cable and h'ist the jib. If you see the least signs of life in the cabin go for 'em with your revolver."

Drawing and cocking one of the revolvers which he had taken from one of the sleeping ruffians, Blake stole to the stern and grasped the tiller.

Nixey drew his bowie-knife, also a spoil from the sleeping men, and in half a dozen cuts severed the anchor-cable.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CAPTAIN SHOWS FIGHT.

THE tide was setting strongly to the north, and the moment the sloop was freed from the holding influence of the anchor, she swung round, but by the time her bow was pointed seaward, Nixey, who, after cutting the cable, had sprung to the jib, had the sail half up; he was not working as quickly as he might, for he was afraid of alarming the sleepers in the cabin, feeling pretty sure that some of the smuggler

gang were bunking there, probably Captain Volcano in person.

The breeze was from the land, and the sloop, being a remarkably good sailer, at once commenced to forge ahead.

Not a sound was heard from the cabin, and Blake thought that a bold stroke might be ventured.

"Suppose I lash the tiller, so as to keep her straight, and help you to get up the sail," he said to the pencil man, as that worthy, after getting the jib up, came cautiously to the stern of the vessel.

"Good enough!" responded the other.

The two men at once set about the work. The ropes were all rigged, and it took but a minute or two to do the job, and still no signs of life in the lower region.

"It would be a joke if there wasn't a critter on board," said Nixey.

"A bigger joke, though, if Volcano and one or two of the chief men of the gang were on board, and we could succeed in not only carrying off the craft, but the owners of it, too."

"That's so."

And then the two men laid hold of the rope of the sail.

"We can't get the cuss up without a noise," Nixey muttered, as they commenced to hoist the sail, and the blocks began to creak and grumble as the ropes ran through them.

"In case any one comes from below, you hold on to the sail, while I will go for them with my revolver," Blake responded.

Nixey nodded assent.

The sail was half-way up, and the two men were hoisting away for dear life, when Captain Volcano, who had been roused from his slumber in the cabin below, by the sound of the creaking blocks, and the rattle of the sail's rings on the mast, made his appearance from below, anger blazing in his eyes.

"You infernal blockheads, what do you mean by getting the craft under way without orders?" he cried, never for an instant suspecting the true state of affairs, and not on the moment recognizing the two men.

As he had come up from the cabin his face, of course, had been turned to the stern, and, to his astonishment, he had seen that the sloop was forging out to sea.

Naturally the first idea that came to him was that it was a mad freak of some of the drunken men, who had muddled their brains during their carouse on shore, and the wild idea had come into their heads to take a cruise in the sloop.

"Ay, ay, sir," sung out the pencil man, attempting to disguise his voice, hoping to deceive the captain into the belief that he was one of the gang, for, from Volcano's words, he readily guessed the error into which he had fallen.

Blake had let go of the rope the moment the captain made his appearance, and stooped for the revolver, which he had laid upon the deck all ready cocked for action.

But the smuggler chief had remarkably quick ears and eyes, and the moment the pencil man spoke he recognized the voice, and at the same time detected Blake stooping for his revolver. He recognized both of them upon the instant, and, although he was astonished by the discovery and knew not what to make of it, for the appearance of the two men, whom he had left in the old cabin securely handcuffed and apparently confined without the possibility of escape, was indeed most startling. They were not only at liberty, but were intent upon running away with the sloop! It was a most astounding circumstance, and the captain had never been more surprised by anything in his life. But, although taken so completely by surprise, he was quick to act. To be prepared for emergencies had become like a second-nature to the smuggler chief, so he had made his appearance, revolver in hand, cocked and ready, and the instant he discovered who the intruders were, he opened fire.

The captain was standing on the steps leading down into the cabin, and half out of sight, only his head and shoulders being visible.

Crack! went Volcano's revolver, and bang! answered the clumsy, old-fashioned pistol which Blake had taken from the sleeping sentinel, and both bullets went wide of the mark.

Again the captain fired, and again Blake returned it, and this time both of the bullets found a billet.

The bullet from Volcano's pistol flying high over Blake's head, cut the rope of the sail which Nixey Weeden was pulling away at for dear life, and down came the sheet by the run to the deck, all in a heap! The pencil man, as he witnessed the accident, swore like a trooper. Blake's bullet, better aimed, struck Volcano in the shoulder, and down into the cabin he tumbled, disappearing as suddenly as though he had been standing on a trap-door which had opened and swallowed him up.

But, although the captain had been beaten and driven from the scene of action, yet terrible mischief had been done. The important sail had been rendered useless, and as the rope had run through the blocks after being severed, it would take some time to repair the damage. Meanwhile the sloop would have to depend upon

the jib alone, and, as the wind was light, very little speed could be hoped for, and then, too, the report of the revolvers had aroused the smugglers on the shore, and in hot haste they came tearing down to the beach, eager to learn what had happened.

Among the rest the two sentinels who had been guarding the prisoners were aroused. Their first thought had been of their charges, and when they had examined the cabin and found it empty, they came rushing down to the beach with the intelligence that the captives had escaped. Of course when this became known the gang at once surmised that the prisoners had boarded the sloop and were endeavoring to make off with her.

A couple of light sleepers who had been awakened by the first pistol-shot had managed to rub the sleep out of their eyes so that they saw the end of the fight, and when they witnessed Volcano's fall and disappearance they concluded that the captain was finished, as far as this world was concerned, and they howled outright in rage, for Volcano was a great favorite among his men.

"The captain is dead! I saw him fall after that fellow shot him!" one of the men exclaimed, as the rest of the gang came rushing down to the beach.

"To the boats!" yelled another; "we can catch the sloop in this breeze easily!"

Then the old smuggler chief, Sabino, arrived upon the beach. A good seaman and a quick reasoner his ready eyes took in all the features of the scene. From the hillside he had seen the sail come down by the run, and had understood that one of the ropes had probably been cut by a stray bullet.

"We have got them safe enough, boys!" he exclaimed. "They haven't got anything but the jib to depend upon, and that won't do them much good in a wind as light as this; we can overtake them easily enough. But we must be careful how we board the sloop for these two fellows will fight like devils. We'll take six boats so as to come at them from all quarters. Look well to your arms for it will be no child's play to take the sloop from these bull-dogs."

The caution was timely, and the gang at once proceeded to examine their weapons, for, although some twenty-five men were yet in the band, from the experience they had already had and the taste of Blake's quality which they had received, they knew that the adventurer alone was worth a dozen or more of ordinary men.

The old smuggler then divided the men into five different detachments; there were but five boats available, for the captain had taken the sixth one. After giving detailed instructions in regard to the mode of attack the boats shoved off, and, propelled by lusty arms at the oars, headed straight for the sloop, which was lazily progressing seaward, as if there was plenty of time and there wasn't the least need of hurry.

This was not the fault of the adventurers, though, for they were getting all the speed out of the craft that was possible under the circumstances.

The gathering of the men upon the beach and their embarkation in the boats had not been unobserved by the two, who fully understood what was threatened.

Nixey ran to the stern and looked over to note the rate of speed of the sloop.

"Oh, it is of no use, pardner," he cried, "we ain't a-doing nothing, nohow! Them boats will come up to us inside of fifteen minutes, for in such a breeze as this, and with nary sail but a jib, we can't do much more than to float along with the tide, not over five knots an hour, anyway."

"They are sure to overtake us, then?"

"Sartin sure."

"Well, we must fight them," was Blake's announcement, as if it was the easiest thing in the world for two men to fight twenty.

"Thar's a heap of 'em!" the pencil man observed, with a dubious glance at the well-filled boats.

"The more the merrier," was the reply, recharging his weapon as he spoke.

"Pardner, I reckon thar ain't ary less skeerier man in all creation than I am," Nixey returned, "but I wish to remark, and I hope that my meaning is plain, that if we haven't made our wills it's about time we ought to."

Blake laughed, the peculiar, odd laugh which seemed so natural to him in the hour of danger.

"Well, old fellow, if the time is close at hand for us to cash up our chips and pass out of the game, the only thing to do is to meet our fate like men. Like Sampson, I am ready to pull down the pillars of the temple if I can crush a heap of my enemies under the ruins, but there's a very old saying that there's many a slip between the cup and the lip, and I'm not going to get ready to quit the game until I have to."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WONDERFUL DISCOVERY.

SLOWLY seaward went the Fair Isabel, urged onward by the light and baffling breeze, which would not increase, despite all energetic remonstrances and curses which the anxious pencil man lavished upon the clerk of the wea-

ther. The boats were gaining rapidly; and after a few minutes' observation Blake was satisfied that his companion had predicted truly, the boats would soon overtake the sloop; but, from the sloop's rate of speed and the progress made by the boats, it would be fully twenty-five minutes before the smugglers would be able to give battle.

"How's that fellow down below?" asked the pencil man, abruptly, the thought having just come to him. "Did you settle his hash for this world?"

"I think not; however, I will go and see. He is the gentleman that helped himself to my red revolvers, and I would give a mighty large sum to get them back just now, for they would come in very handy when this little difficulty begins."

"The chances are that the cuss has got 'em on board, for he took 'em from you on this hyer craft, and he wouldn't be likely to carry 'em on shore."

"I'll take a good look for them, anyway, for we shall need all the weapons in the way of shooting-irons we can get our hands on."

"Say! I never thought!" cried Nixey, suddenly; "there's the cannon hyer," and he slapped his hand upon the covering of the little brass piece. "That will do for one boat if I kin hit it, and as I am a Jack-of-all-trades I reckon that I kin."

"There are five of them," Blake remarked, after a glance at the little fleet pulling along so steadily in the chase. "The cannon will put one out of the way, and that leaves four; and as they will probably divide so as to attack us from all quarters, that will give two boats on each side. Well, if we have shots enough we ought to be able to more than hold our own in this skirmish."

The pencil man shook his head; the result looked doubtful to him, but he was fairly in for it; it was fight with a bare possibility of escaping, or surrender with a certainty of death, at the hands of the enraged smugglers.

"Call me if I stay below too long and they come too near," Blake said, as he descended into the cabin.

"All right; I will call you in plenty of time for the fun," and Nixey made a grimace as he spoke.

Blake descended into the cabin.

The captain was lying all in a heap at the foot of the cabin stairs, and a little pool of blood which had escaped from his wound and stained the cabin floor told that he was pretty badly hurt.

A swinging lamp was burning over the cabin table, so Blake was able to see around him, and to the great joy of the adventurer, the famous red revolvers which had given him his well-known name were lying upon the cabin table.

An exclamation of joy escaped from Blake's lips as he beheld the trusty tools which he prized so highly. He secured them at once; examined them to see if they were properly charged and in good order, which they were, and then replaced them in their holsters which he belted to his waist.

This done he proceeded to relieve Captain Volcano of his weapons, for he knew well enough that the issue of the coming fight would depend greatly upon the number of shots that he and his companion could fire in a minute.

This work accomplished, he regarded the helpless, senseless man reflectively for a few moments.

"The fellow is my enemy, and has done his best to kill me two or three times, and I should be perfectly justified in killing him, but for all that I hate like the deuce to leave him here to bleed to death when a little care might save his life. Altogether I think I had better examine his hurt and stop the flow of blood; then, if he gets well and we run foul of each other again, I can give him his ticket for soup with a clear conscience."

Raising the wounded captain in his arms, Blake placed him upon one of the bunks on the side of the cabin. Then he opened the blood-stained shirt so that he might get a good look at the wound which was in the shoulder.

But, a great surprise awaited the adventurer, and he started back and stared at the senseless form with an exclamation of amazement. Captain Volcano passed for a native-born Californian; perhaps he was so and perhaps he was not; but of this anon. Blake now knew the captain's secret, but for the present the reader must not share it.

The first moments of surprise over Blake proceeded to bandage the wound, handling the patient almost with the skill and care of a regular medical man. In the wild life common to the frontier almost the first thing that a man learns is to attend to such things, for skilled doctors are not at hand.

The wound was a severe one but not by any means mortal, as Blake knew.

After the wound was dressed the adventurer stepped back a step or two and gazed upon the captain.

"He will soon recover his senses, now that the flow of blood is stopped," he murmured. "He will discover of course that some one has attended to him. I may be killed in this com-

ing fight; thus I will not be able to tell him that it was I who dressed his wound and know his secret. He has been my enemy from the first, now what a revenge it would be for me to write upon a slip of paper what I have done, so that his eyes will fall upon it the moment he wakes to consciousness!" And Blake laughed at the idea.

"I will do it at once; but if we both live through this affair he will murder me sure if he gets the chance; but I will risk that."

Blake always carried a memorandum-book and pencil in his pocket; so from this book he tore a leaf and upon the leaf he wrote:

"My bullet wounded you; I found you bleeding and likely to die; so I dressed your wound; but in the future, whether we meet as friends or enemies, your secret will be as safe in my possession as though it was not known to me. As your gang are approaching rapidly, with apparently hostile intent, I take the liberty to repossess myself of the red revolvers, of which you were kind enough to relieve me."

To this he signed his name boldly—"Jackson Blake, late of Frisco."

The paper he pinned to the ruffled front of the captain's embroidered Mexican shirt, then he left the cabin, taking care to close the door securely behind him, and to lock it.

"We will have enough to do to handle these fellows on the outside, without giving this duck a chance to pop at us from the rear," he observed to his companion, as he performed this movement.

"He ain't dead, then?"

"No, but pretty badly plugged. He is insensible at present, but of course may come out of his swoon at any moment."

"Is he all alone down there?"

"Yes," and then a sudden thought occurred to Blake: "By Jove! there is another cabin and I never thought of looking in there. I don't suppose, though, that there is anybody in there, or they would have come to the captain's assistance."

"That's so," assented the other.

But if the adventurer had attempted to enter the inner cabin he would have discovered that the door was locked, and if he had searched for the key he would not have found it unless he had examined the pockets of the captain, for in that inner cabin the alcalde's daughter was confined.

She had heard the noise of the firing, but of course had not the slightest suspicion that friends were at hand; on the contrary she had believed that the smuggler gang had quarreled among themselves.

So when the noise of the fire-arms disturbed her uneasy slumbers—for she had cast herself upon the really elegant bunk, Captain Volcano's own, all dressed, tired nature demanding rest—she only shrunk closer to the cabin wall and murmured a prayer for the souls of the rough and violent men who were engaged, as she believed, in deadly conflict.

So closely do we sometimes jostle each other in this world without knowing it, for Blake of course had not the slightest suspicion that the girl had been abducted by Captain Volcano's orders, while she, on her part, had not the least knowledge of the adventurer's quest in search of the smuggler's haunt.

"They are gitting pretty nigh!" the pencil man remarked, patting the brass piece in an affectionate sort of way.

"You take that side and I this, and make every shot tell!" Blake enjoined.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SEA FIGHT.

BLAKE had given his companion the captain's own two revolvers, so both were pretty well off for weapons, having four revolvers apiece; the weapons were all six-shooters with the exception of the red self-cocking revolvers, and they had seven chambers each, the pair thus had fifty shots between them; and then, there was the little brass piece besides.

The gun was mounted upon a swivel, so that it could be turned in any direction, and Nixey, having had experience with guns, calculated that he could get in two, or perhaps three shots before the boats got so close to the sloop that the cannon could not be depressed enough to hit them.

The ammunition chest, well-fitted up with powder, grape-shot and cannon caps, being but a short distance from the gun Nixey got everything ready so as to be able to change the piece quickly.

The old smuggler chief of Table Mountain, though, did not forget that the gun was on board; he knew the exact range of the piece, too, and did not fail to discover, as he came dashing on in the foremost boat, that the captors of the sloop were preparing to use the gun.

The boats were coming on in a cluster, and Nixey had calculated that at a single discharge of the brass piece he would be able to rake the whole of them if his aim was only good enough; but, before the fleet got within range old Sabino gave the command to scatter; so, away from each other the boats went, spreading out in fan-like lines, while the pencil man cried:

"Oh, come on, darn your pictur's! I would

have ram-jamed the hull of ye in a minute if you had only stuck together!"

Even the elements seemed to be favoring the attacking party now, for the light breeze which had been urging the sloop forward began to die away, and the boats gained rapidly as the Fair Isabel lost her headway, and drifted with the tide.

"A little hurricane would be acceptable just about now," Blake remarked, with a glance at the jib which was hanging about as motionless as though it was made of sheet lead.

"Them boats must be within range now," Nixey muttered, squinting over the breech of the brass piece and trying to calculate for the rise and fall of the sloop upon the bosom of the tide. "When I fit into the war, I used to be counted a tolerable good gunner, but this durned old vessel keeps bobbing up and down so that I dunno whether I could hit the side of a house or not; but hyer goes, anyway!"

Another long squint, and then, as the sloop listed to port, the pencil man discharged the piece.

Bang! rung out the loud report, and the grape-shot skimmed, swallow-like over the surface of the water burying themselves beneath the water only a short distance from the foremost boat wherein sat the old smuggler chief.

It was an excellent line-shot, and only a trifle short; a trifle more elevation to the gun and considerable damage would surely have been done.

Cries of derision and contempt rose on the air from the lips of the ruffian band, but the cries were speedily stopped when they beheld the speed with which the vagabond proceeded to load the brass piece and realized that they would be exposed to another shot or two before they could hope to gain the side of the sloop.

"That galoot knows how to handle a gun, whoever he is!" growled the veteran smuggler gunner, who was in the boat with the old chief.

Again Nixey took careful aim and fired, and this time the cries that followed the discharge of the piece were not in derision, but in anger.

The shot had told, striking the bow of one of the boats killing two men outright and completely wrecking the little craft. Down she went, bow first, her crew struggling in the water. One of the other boats went to the assistance of the swimming men, while the rest pulled with increased speed for the sloop.

At first not a man in the smuggler band had had the least doubt that it would be a comparatively easy task to retake the sloop, but now another idea began to dawn upon their minds, yet still they pushed onward, with true bulldog courage.

The pencil man had not been idle, either, but, after witnessing the successful result of his carefully aimed shot, he worked to reload the gun as if his life depended upon it.

The third shot was as successful as the second. Another boat was ripped open and three men killed this time. As before, one of the other boats stopped to pick up the uninjured men, and the rest of the gang, being now within revolver range, opened a sharp fire upon the sloop.

Blake sheltered himself behind the mast, while Nixey dodged down behind the brass piece and with right good will returned the shots.

It was a terribly unequal duel, for the men in the boats had not the least shelter, while the two on board of the craft were almost completely protected; then the smugglers were poor shots indeed when compared to such a paragon of a marksman as the hero of the red revolver, and indeed but few of them were as good a shot as the pencil man, who handled his weapons with skill.

But Blake! why, every shot told; two boats now had come up on his side, while only one was attempting to board at the other side where Nixey was on duty, and in less time than it takes to write the details of the affair, Blake, with his wonderful skill, had disabled all the oarsmen of both boats, and the rest of the gang in an agony of terror had flung themselves down in the bottom of the boats. No longer did they think of fighting; no longer was there any idea in their mind of boarding the Fair Isabel and of punishing the insolent rascals who had not only stolen the craft right from her moorings, but had tumbled the skipper heels over head down his own companionway; all they thought of was to escape from the deadly fire that was cutting down their best men as though grim death himself with his sickle had taken an active part in the contest.

Slowly the sloop floated off to the northward; a little cat's-paw of wind sprung up and filled the sail, and she began to cut through the water at a pretty good rate of speed, leaving the boats behind; the pencil man had been as successful in beating off the attack on his side as Blake on his. Never since the smuggler band had first been formed had they received such a bloody lesson.

Both had suspended fire when the smugglers had given up the battle, for they disdained to kill beaten and panic-stricken men.

As the light breeze bore the sloop away the smugglers plucked up courage enough to bend to their oars again, those who had not been dis-

abled in the fight, but they did not attempt to follow the sloop; they had got all the fighting they had stomach for; all they cared for now was to get to the shore as fast as possible so that the wounded men could be attended to. As for the sloop and the victors in the fight both might go to Old Nick, although Captain Volcano was on board, and whether dead or alive they knew not.

The conquerors had come out of the contest pretty well. Nixey had been wounded in three different places, but luckily all his hurts were merely flesh-wounds. Blake, with his accustomed good fortune, had come off without a scratch. Really the man seemed to bear a charmed life.

"Hooray!" yelled Nixey, in delight, as the little burst of wind distended the jib, and the sloop, feeling the influence, began to cut through the water, the waves rippling under the stern in a very pleasant way to the ears of the two adventurers who still were anxious to get away from the neighborhood. Not so anxious, though, as they had been a short half-hour before when they had first discovered the boats of the smugglers pulling out from the shore. "We have flaxed 'em, horse, foot and dragoons! Oh, didn't we salivate 'em?"

"About as clean a beat as I ever had anything to do with," Blake responded. "The expedition will be a success, after all, although the Green Dolphin did come to grief in the first of it."

"I tell you the general will be mighty well pleased and you kin charge him what you like and he will be glad to foot the bill."

"Foot what bill?"

"Why, for this hyer thing."

"Pay me for protecting my own life?"

"No, not that exactly, but pay you for capturing this hyer craft and her captain down in the cabin."

"Then you suppose that I am going to turn over this sloop and its wounded, helpless owner, Captain Volcano, into the hands of your general?"

"Why, in course! Then you'll git square with him, you know, for I tell you the general has been working up a case ag'in' this Captain Volcano, a long time, and when he gets into the hands of the Mexican Government they will be mighty sartin to make it hot for him."

"Well, now, really, I think the captain and myself are pretty even; if there is a balance I am afraid it is against me; but, one thing I can tell you, your general don't get Captain Volcano through me! If he wants him he will have to come and take him as I have done. I do not play the jackal to any man's lion," Blake declared, firmly.

CHAPTER XXV.

A NEW PERIL.

"BUT, thunder and lightning! jest think what you kin make out of it!" Nixey exclaimed, disgusted that Blake would have none of his cunning scheme.

"Oh, there is a deal of money in it, is there?"

"You bet!"

"How much?"

The pencil man fell at once into the trap, catching eagerly at the idea; his motto was that every man could be bought provided you bid high enough—not a new thing this, by any manner of means, as England's crafty minister, Walpole, publicly said the same, years and years ago, and every tricky statesman has acted upon the idea since the world began, almost. Nixey thought that his companion was playing shy so as to get a good price.

"Well, I don't exactly know 'bout that," he replied, cautiously.

His purpose was to beat his "pardner" down and favor his master by getting Blake to accept a low figure.

"You said a large figure," Blake observed. "Now, that is a point upon which opinions may differ; what would be a large figure—a very large figure, indeed—to one man, might not appear so large to another. Now, I am very extravagant in regard to figures. A man has got to go 'way up to touch me."

The other looked annoyed; he didn't like this kind of talk.

"Now then, how much will the general give?" Blake demanded.

Thus driven to name the sum, Nixey was forced to answer.

"How does a hundred dollars strike you?"

Blake laughed and shook his head.

"Ain't a hundred enough?" Nixey growled.

"No, sir, not for such a man as Captain Volcano."

"Well, mebbe he might give two hundred," and the pencil man looked askance at Blake, anxious to ascertain the impression this offer made upon him, but, to his disgust, the other again laughed, contemptuously.

"A big sum, eh?" Blake exclaimed. "You talk about big sums, and when I bring you down to figures you reel out a miserable hundred dollars and then whack up another hundred on top of it. Why, that isn't any money for a gentleman to look at! I have lost more than that in five minutes at a game of poker,

and how long will two hundred dollars last a man if he sits down to tackle the 'tiger,' or has it in his mind to amuse himself like a gentleman in attempting to break a monté-bank?"

"Well, I reckon a couple o' hundred dollars is a heap of money," Nixey returned, in bad humor.

"To some men it may be, but it is not to me; you will have to come up to the thousands to touch my figure."

"Oh, you are joking!" astonishment written on his face.

"Not a bit of it; I was never more serious in my life. If the general cares to pay about five thousand dollars for Captain Volcano, why, then, I might be induced to talk about the matter, for five thousand dollars is a very tidy sum."

"A tidy sum!" the pencil man fairly howled; "well, I reckon that it is, and I reckon you will hold on to Captain Volcano a mighty long time afore you get the general or anybody else to go five thousand dollars on him."

"No money, no man," Blake assured.

"The general would go a hundred or two on him—that is, if he could have him delivered on Mexican sile, 'cos the cuss has been so durned smart in the way he has carried on his smuggling operations, and he has got so many of the alcaldes of these border towns in with him, that it would be hard work to hold him on the American side."

"And he is too deuced sharp to let you catch him on Mexican territory, eh?"

"That's so, for he knows mighty well that we would salivate him, law or no law."

"You are a Mexican spy, then, and this pencil business of yours was only a dodge to keep your real occupation from being suspected?"

Nixey grinned; he was rather proud of the thing.

"In course, and that is the reason why I played the fool round the town; nobody would suspect a drunken idiot of being up to anything, you know."

"You played the character to the life," Blake admitted, with a grave face, and the pencil man hardly knew whether to take the remark for a compliment or otherwise.

The breeze had freshened considerably, and the sloop running straight before it was making good headway, when it is considered that she was depending upon the jib alone.

The smugglers had pulled back to the shore, about as well beaten a set as had ever taken weapon in hand. Right good reason had they to curse the hour when evil fortune had sent the Fresh of Frisco to the southern Californian coast. His single self had wrought them more harm than all the power that the Mexican Government had exerted against them. Their vessel captured, together with their best fighting man, the real leader of the gang, (although the old smuggler chief of Table Mountain was supposed to be entitled to that honor,) two-thirds of the band either dead or badly wounded—it was little wonder that they cursed the evil luck which had brought them in contact with this devil of an adventurer.

But, they could not fight against fate; fortune had decreed that Blake should triumph in the struggle, and now that the victory was his, he was sailing northward, bearing the conquered Captain Volcano along to adorn his triumph, just as the Roman victors used to do in the brave days of old.

Blake had kept his eyes upon the smugglers, for he was not sure but what they might make an attempt to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat; in a very few minutes, however, he became satisfied that he had nothing to fear from them, so he turned his attention to the condition of the sloop.

"I say, you are a nautical man, and used to all this sort of thing, can't you splice that rope so that we can get the sail up?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, that will be easy enough," answered, Nixey, readily.

"Suppose you set about it, then; there is a good wind, and it seems to be getting stronger, too, and if we had the use of this sail, it wouldn't take us very long to make San Diego."

"Are you going to take this Captain Volcano into San Diego, and then let him go?" asked the spy, resolved to make one last effort to help the Irish-Mexican general to the possession of the noted smuggler.

"Oh, no; I am not going to let him go, but I am going to let him let me go."

The pencil man stared; he did not understand this juggling with words.

"It is simple enough," Blake continued, perceiving that the other had not caught his meaning. "When we come to anchor in San Diego bay, you and I will get into the boat and pull to the shore, leaving the sloop and its captain to their own devices."

"And a couple hundred dollars wouldn't be any inducement for you to anchor the boat in Mexican waters?" Nixey asked.

"Quite right; it wouldn't be any inducement at all."

"Five hundred!" cried the pencil man, desperately. "Five hundred! perhaps he might give five hundred, but it is an awful price!"

"Would he give five thousand?"

"Five thousand? No, he ain't crazy!"

"Well, sir, then we cannot trade."

Nixey had never encountered such a man before.

"And now suppose you get to work on that sail," Blake suggested finding that his companion was silenced.

The adventurer had not the remotest intention of yielding the captain to the Mexican representative for any sum of money. If the spy had said that the general would give five thousand, Blake straightway would have increased his price to ten. In fact, no matter what price the general would have offered, Blake would have wanted more. To his mind, there was something repugnant in the idea of selling the captive to the foe who had not the ability to beat him, himself.

And, too, now that Blake knew the carefully hidden secret of the bold smuggler, that was another reason why he should not deliver him into the hands of his enemy, so queerly was the mind of the adventurer constituted, for to most men the discovery of the secret would have been the strongest possible reason for getting the owner of the secret out of the way.

No wonder the captain desired the death of the Frenchman, for when Blake had opened the shirt to attend to the wound, there upon the captain's breast he had seen the same mystic signs which had been tattooed on the Frenchman's flesh—the enigma, the solving of which he was sure would put the fortunate discoverer on the right track to the secret mine.

But, for all that, Blake had determined to let the captain go free.

Nixey set to work to repair damages, while Blake took the helm, and then suddenly, from the fore part of the deck, a tongue of smoke came curling up into the air.

The Fair Isabel was on fire!

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DESPERATE DEED.

THE pencil man, who was kneeling on the deck examining the severed rope, was the first to discover the thin, vapor-like smoke. The moon, now well up and nearly full, lighted the deck of the vessel almost as well as though it was day, and, therefore, when the smoke column came curling upward Nixey discovered it at once.

"Hallo! I say, pardner!" he cried, "durn my cats! if I don't believe that the sloop is on fire!"

Blake, at the helm, was decidedly startled at this intelligence. The pencil man ran forward to examine into the matter, and, as he did so, a spurt of fire eat its way through the deck.

There was not the slightest doubt in regard to the matter now, in the minds of either, and both jumped to the same conclusion: that Captain Volcano had recovered his senses, and, finding himself a captive in the hands of his conquerors, and the sloop, under full headway, probably carrying him straight into the hands of his foes, he had resolved, rather than submit, to destroy the craft.

The moment the flames broke through the deck Nixey knew no time was to be lost. The "painter" of the boat with which he and his companion had boarded the sloop was still fastened to the bow-chains. He untied it at once and towed it alongside of the sloop toward the stern.

"We must take to the boat instantly and pull for our lives; there is probably gunpowder on board and she is liable to blow up at any moment."

"That fellow is grit, clean through!" Blake exclaimed, as he descended into the boat, and his companion pushed off. Then the two noticed that there was a small boat towing behind the sloop.

"There is a chance for him to escape," Nixey observed, nodding to the boat as both he and his companion bent to the oars; "that is, if he don't wait too long and the powder don't blow him to eternal smash."

Then, as they pulled away, they could plainly hear the sound of violent blows and they at once understood what it meant.

Captain Volcano was forcing his way through the locked cabin door.

Then came a violent crash and the captain appeared upon deck; he at once darted to the helm, seized the tiller and putting the sloop about headed directly for the shore, to beach her if he could before the fire made a complete wreck of her.

The flames were gaining rapidly though, and it was apparent that the smuggler would soon be forced to take to the boat.

"He can't make the shore, the fire will drive him off mighty soon, now," was Nixey's opinion, as he watched the spread of the conflagration.

By this time the boat wherein the two sat and the doomed sloop were at a considerable distance apart, and the space was widening every moment, but the two could still plainly see all that took place on board of the Fair Isabel. Judge of their surprise, then, when they saw a female form emerge from the cabin.

And both of the men recognized her at once!

"Durned if it ain't the alcalde's daughter!"

"Margerite, by Heaven!" Blake cried, between his firm-set teeth.

And she on her part, too, saw the men in the boat, for she stretched out her hands imploringly, and her piteous cries for help came pealing over the water.

"What is she afeard of—the fire or the fellow?" asked the pencil man, as both he and his partner involuntarily rested on their oars, wonder-struck at the unexpected discovery.

"The fellow more than the fire, I am afraid," Blake replied, an angry light shining in his eyes. "She can escape the fire easily enough, for, see! he is getting the boat ready now, and it is evident that she don't want to go with him."

It was the truth no doubt, for again she stretched out her hands to the boat and appealed to them for aid—aid that they could not render, no matter how great their good will, for they were entirely too far off, but Blake had half a mind to make the attempt.

"Shall we put about and try to overtake them after they get into the boat?" he asked.

"Why thar ain't the slightest chance of doing that!" assured the other. "This is only an old tub of a boat anyway, and though we do pull two pair of oars to his one, in that light boat and with this big start we couldn't hope to catch him, nohow you could fix it."

"That is very true," Blake admitted, reluctant to give up the idea.

"But, arter they got on shore if the gal shows fight and is ugly about going with him, mebber we might be able to do something."

Blake shook his head; his keen eyes had noticed the smugglers' movements as well as the actions of the captain and his fair charge.

Old Sabino and his men had reached the shore, and all of them who were fit for action had started up along the beach to meet Volcano.

And although the adventurers had whipped the outlaws in a fair sea fight, it was too much to expect that they would be able to chase them to the land and repeat the operation there.

Blake fairly groaned aloud when he realized that by carrying off the girl, Volcano might be said to have pulled victory from between the very jaws of defeat.

"Oh, if I had only examined that forward cabin!" he muttered.

"But you didn't, pardner, and no wonder, for you had all on your hands that a man could attend to," the pencil man remarked. "And mebber now you see that it would have been a heap sight better if you had agreed to give up this p'isen snake to the general. I tell you what it is, pardner, thar is sich a thing as being too durned liberal and easy in this world. My idee is that when you get sich a cuss as this fellow down, the best thing you kin do is to fix it so as to keep 'im down."

Blake paid very little attention to the words of his companion, he was too busily engaged in watching the boat, now fast nearing the shore, wherein Volcano and his captive sat, for that that was the relationship between the two, he had no doubt.

"Hain't we better git up and git?" suggested Nixey, finding that the other was so completely absorbed. "We have got a pretty tough pull of it, anyway, ten or a dozen miles, and the tide is in our favor now, while if we fool around much we will have it against us."

"Go ahead!" Blake ordered, with a long breath, a sort of a cross between a sigh and a groan. "Although I hate like blazes to leave the girl in that fellow's power, there isn't any help for it, as far as I can see."

The two bent to the oars, and again the boat shot ahead. It was easy pulling, the surface of the water being almost as smooth as glass.

In the mean time the fire had worked sore destruction on board of the sloop. She was now one sheet of flame from the water's edge to the topmast. And then, when the fire reached the little magazine, which supplied the wants of the gun, there was an explosion, which tore the sloop all to pieces, and scattered the burning fragments wide over the water.

"Good-by to Captain Volcano's pet craft, anyhow," Nixey observed. "This hyer expedition was started out to bust her up and it succeeded. The job has been done, though not exactly in the way we calculated to do the trick."

But Blake was occupied in thinking of the girl, calculating in regard to the best and speediest means of rescuing her from her present perilous position, for that he would attempt to rescue her was with him a foregone conclusion.

Her father's help he would have, of course, for there wasn't any doubt in his mind that the old alcalde, with all his tricks, would be fearfully indignant at this abduction. And the Mexican agent, too—might not his aid be obtained? The sport was well aware that to tear the girl from the power of the smugglers would be no light task. The mountain region must be invaded and Captain Volcano hunted down in his lair.

"Old fellow, I am not at all satisfied to leave the girl in the hands of that ruffian!" Blake exclaimed, abruptly, "and the moment we reach

San Diego, I am going to raise a force to track this fellow right to his home; do you suppose that your man, the general, would like to take a hand in the fun?"

"I bet you!" the pencil man cried. "That is jest what he is hyer after—that is his little game from the word go! Oh, he will jest jump at the chance and be willing to pay mighty well for it, too. I suppose if you get the captain this time you won't object to letting the general have him?"

"I am willing to make that bargain, provided he helps me to rescue the girl."

Four hours of steady toil brought the pair into San Diego harbor, just as the morning light was beginning to break.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MUSTERING FORCES.

THE Green Dolphin had gone to the bottom, sinking very soon after the collision with the smuggler sloop, and the general and his men had barely a chance to escape being carried down with her. They had taken to the small boat immediately, and, although the yawl was much overloaded, had managed to reach the shore in safety, and when once on the land all had stoutly sworn that they would not trust themselves again upon the bosom of the treacherous deep; so they had resolved to walk back to San Diego, and as no one in the party was acquainted with the way across the mountain, they resolved to follow the line of the sea, walking on the beach, though it was a terribly roundabout route. Besides, they had a fear that, if they attempted to cross the mountain, the smugglers, whose domain would thus be invaded, might ambush and cut them off.

The party took a great deal of time in the journey, for it was a hard and rough tramp, and so it happened that Blake and Nixey arrived at just the same time as the weary and footsore adventurers, who came swearing into the town, about as completely disgusted a set of men as could well be found anywhere in this world.

The rest were astonished upon beholding the two whom they had given up for dead, thinking that they had found a watery grave at the time of collision, and great was their amazement when they listened to the story of the adventures of the pair.

But there wasn't any one of the gang who "bankered" for any more fun with either Captain Volcano or his gang; even the general admitted that, for the present, he thought he had about enough. The smuggler's craft was destroyed, and the Fair Isabel having ceased to exist, his mission might be said to be at an end. He privately explained to Blake that he was without money to take any new steps, for, to settle with the owners of the Green Dolphin for the loss of that craft and to pay off the men, would exhaust all his funds, and, as he reminded Blake, money was the sinews of war, and no matter how well an army might be supplied otherwise, if they lacked money, they lacked the needful thing to command success.

This remark came forcibly home to Blake, for without money his expedition to recover the alcalde's daughter could not start, any more than a bird could fly without wings. He would need, at the very least, eight or ten good men; their wages would amount to two dollars per day for each man in addition to their "grub." Then a mule was indispensable to transport the provisions, and Blake had, all told, about twenty-five dollars in his pocket.

The situation looked desperate, but the sport did not know the meaning of the word despair. The alcalde would surely aid him.

"When he learns of his daughter's danger he won't grudge the money to save her," he murmured, as he selected a snug nook under a clump of trees and stretched himself out to catch a few hours' sleep. All had determined to bunk down where they were, as it would be three or four hours before the town would be fairly awake.

And so utterly tired were all of them that within ten minutes all were sleeping like logs.

Three hours' sleep sufficed for Blake, and those three hours made a new man of him.

Leaving the others all sleeping away, Blake hurried off to seek the alcalde.

He found the house of the official without difficulty. The alcalde was at breakfast, and when Blake saw the comfortable way in which he was enjoying the meal, he thought to himself that he did not look much like a man who was sorrowing over the loss of a much-loved daughter.

The look which came over the face of the alcalde, when he beheld his visitor, showed that he did not hold Blake in high esteem.

"Good-morning, alcalde! I came to see you in regard to your daughter," plunging at once into business.

The alcalde looked amazed.

"My daughter!" in wonder.

"Yes; I know where she is."

"Well, what of it?" the official asked, evidently mystified, much to Blake's astonishment.

"What of it?" cried Blake, not able to make head or tail of this indifference.

"Yes, what of it, and what business is it of

yours, anyway?" the alcalde was evidently out of temper.

"What business is it of mine! Why, it is the business of every honest man in such a case as this."

"You will excuse me if I doubt that!" the alcalde retorted, tartly. "You have nothing whatever to do with my daughter, and you make yourself extremely officious by interfering in my affairs. You will get yourself into trouble, señor American, as you did before, and you may not be lucky enough to get out as well this time."

"No threats, alcalde, for they are wasted on me!" Blake answered, hotly. "And I reckon that I am the best judge when to take a hand in the game. There is no love lost between you and myself, I know that well enough, and I tell you to your teeth, I wouldn't take two steps to save you from the fires below; but, in your daughter's case it is a different matter. She put herself to some trouble to help me once, and I would go through a deal of danger to aid her in any way."

"You are wasting time!" the alcalde cried, impatiently. "I care nothing for either your friendship or your enmity; all I ask of you is to leave me and mine alone. Go about your business, and do not trouble yourself with our affairs."

Thus rebuffed, some men would have retired in anger and disgust, but when Blake entered upon a thing, he clung to his purpose with bulldog-like tenacity, and, like the dog, death alone could shake him from his gripe.

"Old man, I overlook your words, for it is evident to me that you do not know what has happened," he said, restraining the angry spirit which burned in his veins.

"It is very evident to me that you do not know what has happened," the alcalde retorted, "for if you did, you would not force yourself into a house where you are a most unwelcome guest."

"Your daughter is not here?"

"No, but what is that to you—what business is it of yours, again I ask?"

"Do you know that she is in the hands of this outlaw smuggler chief, Captain Volcano?"

"You are uttering falsehoods, sir!" retorted the alcalde, in anger. "Captain Volcano is neither a smuggler nor an outlaw. He is an honest man, and the captain of an honest trading craft, in which I have an interest."

"In which you had an interest, you mean!" cried Blake, bluntly, "for I took that sloop to-night, and held Volcano a prisoner below deck, and, in order to save himself, he set fire to the craft, and your interest has gone to the devil, where you will probably find it one of these days."

The alcalde started to his feet in consternation. "The sloop destroyed!" he cried.

"Yes, and the captain escaped from her, bearing your daughter with him."

"The sloop destroyed! *Caramba!* The curse of Heaven upon the luck! There go a thousand dollars at one swoop! And you, you miserable stranger wretch," and he turned fiercely upon Blake, "you have done all this mischief, and dare to come here and tell me of it?"

"You infernal old scoundrel!" retorted Blake, "you think only of the loss of your money and care not for your daughter, who is a helpless prisoner in the hands of this villainous captain."

"It is no such thing!" the alcalde cried, "perceiving a chance to wound the man who had worked him so much harm, for the old man prized every one of his dollars as if they were so many drops of his blood. "You are acting like a madman in this matter. My daughter ran away with the captain, of her own free will; there has been a love-affair going on between them for some time, and although there wasn't really any need of an elopement, for I had not the least objection to the union—in fact favored the alliance all that I could—yet it pleased her silly, romantic fancy to run away by night and share the captain's cabin, and if I did not know the captain to be a man of the purest honor I should undoubtedly be alarmed for my girl's safety, but, knowing him as I do, I feel perfectly sure that a priest will unite them in wedlock as soon as the captain can procure one, which he can easily do at the first Mexican port at which he touches; so, señor, if you are indulging in any foolish hopes in regard to the girl, the grapes are sour, bear in mind."

CHAPTER XXVIII. TEMPTING FORTUNE.

WITH all the venom in his nature the old man had spoken the words, for he felt a fiendish joy in crushing down any hopes which might have sprung up in the heart of the adventurer in regard to Margerite, and now that he knew she was lost to him forever—for, of course if he had any of the spirit of a man in his bosom he would not care for a woman who had willingly run away with another man—but to the surprise of the alcalde the result was exactly contrary to what he had expected.

The adventurer laughed long and loud, and the old man, annoyed, demanded the reason.

"Why do you laugh? Do you doubt what I have said? Did not you yourself state that the girl was with the captain?"

"Oh yes; and that fact doesn't trouble me in the least except that I fear the treacherous, malicious devil may be tempted to kill the captive," Blake replied.

The Californian opened wide his little eyes in wonder.

"Why should you fear such a thing as that? What reason have you for any such supposition? Men do not generally kill the women they love, particularly when they have them safe in their own possession."

Blake surveyed the old man keenly, for a moment, much to the other's astonishment, and then again the adventurer laughed, but this time it was a quiet chuckle, whereupon the Californian, hot with anger, said:

"Now, sir, since we have come to an understanding, I hope you will have the goodness to retire, for I much prefer your room to your company."

"Then you are not anxious to rescue your daughter from the hands of Captain Volcano?"

"She went of her own free will—she sent me a message after leaving, so that I would not be alarmed, and I do not propose to interfere in the matter at all."

"She did not go with the man of her own accord!" Blake asserted; "and when I saw her carried from the deck of the burning sloop she stretched out her hands and implored me to come to her aid."

"Panic-stricken probably on account of the fire and she knew not what she was doing," the alcalde replied, calmly, and Blake saw that it was useless to waste any more time with him, for he was evidently satisfied to have the girl with Volcano.

"Well, I am going to organize a party to follow the girl and take her out of the hands of this handsome rascal, and I want to borrow about two hundred dollars of you to fill my military chest," Blake announced, in a business-like way.

The alcalde grew fairly purple with rage.

"Lend you two hundred dollars!" he cried, or rather shrieked.

"Yes, or you can make it three hundred, if you feel inclined to be generous."

"Not a penny! Not a single copper piece if you lay dying in the street—starving for want of food!"

"Well, I ain't come to that yet, and I won't, alcalde, as long as I've a good right arm left. You won't lend the money to rescue your daughter from the power of the rascal?"

"Lend? *Caramba!*" and for a moment the Californian swore a string of old Spanish oaths with a fluency and gusto that was really wonderful.

Blake turned upon his heel.

"Well, if you won't lend me the money, I must raise it elsewhere."

"If you attempt to depart—you and your cutthroats, I will have you stopped and every one of you shall be hanged!"

"That will make rope dear and the undertaking trade lively. Well, so-long! I will have the girl back here safe enough, inside of three days." And the adventurer departed, leaving the alcalde to swear and to deplore the evil fortune which had sent these wild and reckless gold-seekers to the southern Californian shore.

Blake walked quietly to the center of the town, his mind busily engaged in attempting to think of some way to raise the money, lacking which the enterprise could not start.

Two hundred dollars, though, was quite a sum; it did not grow upon every bush nor was the money to be had for the asking. Blake was a total stranger in the town. He knew of no one of whom he could borrow a cent. If he had ten or twenty acquaintances, friends whom he had obliged, he might, by borrowing a small sum from each, have been able to obtain the gross amount, but under the circumstances such a thing was not possible. Nor could he obtain credit on his supplies either. Food, ammunition, animals were all cash down; and no wonder, for, after the miner had obtained his supplies and started for the interior, it was an even toss up whether he ever came back alive or not.

If Blake had sojourned some time in the town and had followed his old occupation of card-sharp, from some brother sharp in luck, at such times the most generous of men to a brother professional in want, he might have got the aid he needed.

All sorts of wild plans for raising the funds came into Blake's head, but one idea never found entrance there, and that was to abandon the enterprise. He was as firmly determined to go and wrest the girl from the captain's power as though there was not the slightest obstacle in the path.

In the center of the town, which was full of people hurrying to and fro, Blake encountered the pencil man with a gang of resolute and desperate-looking fellows at his heels.

"Hallo! you're my mutton!" cried Nixey, as he beheld the adventurer. "Say, boys, hyer's the captain himself! G'in him three cheers and a tiger!"

And the crowd did, with a will, nearly all of them knowing Blake and his deeds well.

"You see, sport, I have changed my mind," Nixey explained. "I reckon that, seeing as how I was in at the beginning of the thing, I would see it through, and as I knew you wanted a gang to go along, I picked up these hyer big fighting men. They are warriors, every mother's son of them, and I reckon if we find this hyer mine you have got track of"—and here Nixey winked significantly at Blake, who at once comprehended the device that the pencil man had used to gain recruits—"I reckon, as I was saying, it will take a heap of blood, and mud, and chawing to put us out of it! Held your own! that's my platform; and if you can't, take a brick!"

Blake took a good look at his "army." They were a fine set of fellows whom the pencil man had taken a deal of pains to select.

Everything was ready but the money; but, where was that to come from. He took Nixey one side.

"The only trouble is lack of funds," he explained. "These fellows must have both grub and ammunition, and I have hardly got money enough to supply us."

"Go break some faro-bank!" was the spy's instant suggestion, "that is, if you are a hoss on that sort of thing."

The advice was good, for Blake was a "hoss" in that respect if ever a man was.

"Nothing venture nothing win," had ever been his motto since he began to fight life's troublesome battle.

"Well, I have broken a 'bank' in my time, and more than one, too. Is there a 'square' game in the town?"

"Yes, right across the way," and Nixey pointed to the place.

An enterprising devotee of the green cloth had taken an empty store and opened a game in full sight of everybody. There were six or seven players then in the place.

"I will go fur 'em, and either cut his claws or feel 'em!" Blake declared.

He crossed the street and entered the store, while Nixey and the "army" came straggling along behind.

The "game" was a light one, nearly everybody playing dollar chips, the lowest value sold, and very few of the players were venturing more than a single chip at a time.

The gamblers seemed pleased when they saw the crowd come strolling in; it looked like business.

Blake watched the game for a few minutes to see how the thing was running, and then being satisfied that it was "on the square," he pulled out his money and bought twenty-five dollars' worth of chips.

Again the guardians of the green cloth smiled; this was a good beginning, something different from the rest, who had only invested five and ten apiece.

Luck had been running, too, in favor of the "bank," and luck in a gambler's eye is everything. The tide of fortune was setting against those who were endeavoring to snatch money from between the tiger's claws, and the gentle gamblers who controlled the affair nothing doubted that Blake's twenty-five dollars' worth of checks would soon be swallowed up. They looked upon him as a sheep to be shorn.

"I guess I will go a dollar on the queen; I was always partial to women," Blake observed, as he put a chip upon the card.

CHAPTER XXIX. BLAKE'S SYSTEM.

"MAKE your bets, gentlemen," the dealer said. The pack had just run out and a new deal was about to commence.

One other man followed Blake's example and put a chip on the queen. The rest were shy and held off, which did not suit the dealer at all.

"Come, come, gentlemen, sail in!" he enjoined. "You'll never get rich in the world if you don't try."

"It is a square game every time, gentlemen," added his assistant. "You kin make a pile in a few minutes if so be as luck runs your way."

"Yes, sir, that is the kind of talk that suits," the owner of the game chimed in. "Here's a good thousand dollars jest a-waiting for some lucky man. I am jest a-doing this for fun. I'm a philanthropist, I am; I reckon that that air hard word is too much for you sports, eh? Wal—it means a cuss wot goes around a-chucking away of his money, and that is jest wot I am a-doing. Hyer's the solid stuff for you if you have only got pluck enough to go for it."

Under the influence of this persuasive appeal, aided, too, by the musical chink of the coins as the gamester carelessly rattled them through his fingers, letting them fall in a heap upon the green cloth, three more of the bystanders invested in "chips" and made their bets.

After all, the chance of striking a "lead" at faro was not much more uncertain than the chance of hitting gold in the diggings.

The game commenced and the third card that came out was a queen, and the queen lost Blake's chip was therefore raked in, but he immediately put two more chips upon the rather stern-looking beauty.

The dealer nodded approvingly. "That is the way to do it! Never despair! Hit 'em ag'in!" he cried.

Two more cards, and again a queen appeared, and again the queen lost. Blake's two chips went to join his first one, but immediately he placed four chips upon the queen.

The dealer smiled and winked knowingly at the crowd.

"Nothing like pluck and a sticking to your game," he remarked; he would not have been so cheerful and amused if he had been a veteran sport, which he was not, for by this time he would have detected that Blake was playing upon a system—a system about as old as the game of faro itself, and which, out of a hundred systems devised by skillful brains to "beat" the game in a mathematical way, was about the only one ever known to succeed with any degree of certainty, where the percentage against the player and in favor of the bank is so heavy that a man must be greatly favored by fortune to overcome it.

The system is an extremely simple one. Bet on one card only, double your bet every time you lose, reverse the operation every time you win. If the player is lucky and the game is a fair one, provided that the gamster has capital enough, he is about as sure to beat faro in this way as by any other system that the art of man has ever devised.

The game was fair, for the dealer didn't know enough to make it otherwise, but whether Blake had capital enough or was destined to be lucky was something that time alone could tell.

Again the queen, false and fickle as her sex proverbially is, came out on the losing side, but no sooner had the assistant raked in Blake's four checks than he replaced them with eight.

All looked amazed at this, for such perseverance was wonderful to them all, and although they admired Blake's pluck, yet they privately thought he showed very little good sense in sticking to a card which had proved unlucky three times hand-running.

And if you had attempted to prove to these men that, by the laws of mathematics, a card which had lost three times had much more chance of winning on the fourth trial than of losing, they would have simply laughed at the idea and set down the promulgator of it as being a little cracked in the upper story.

For this time about all the interest in the game had centered upon Blake's stake, for, although there were three or four others playing with varying fortunes, none of them ever ventured more than two chips at a time.

The game went on, the fourth queen came out and this time she won; so, at a single stroke, Blake won back the seven chips which he had lost and a chip in addition.

Blake bet no more on that deal, but when a fresh one began, he ventured four checks on the queen.

The dealer laughed.

"Durn my skin!" he cried, "but, stranger, you do beat all the chaps I ever saw for sticking to a thing."

A queen was out early this time, and as she came out in the right place, Blake had the satisfaction of winning four chips. He drew six toward him and allowed two to remain.

Again the queen won, and again he bet on the same card, one chip only this time.

The third queen lost, and then Blake doubled his bet and the fourth queen won.

And just about this time the gamblers got it into their rather thick heads that the quiet sport was playing according to a system, and that if he went on as he had begun, gaining slowly but surely all the time, it was only a question of minutes in regard to his breaking the bank. They began to get anxious. The system seemed to be a good one; and then, too, luck was favoring the player, undoubtedly.

"Is there any limit to the game?" Blake asked, after he had despoiled the bank of about fifty chips.

"Nary limit; go in and bu'st us, if you kin," the dealer replied, with an air of dogged determination, yet, withal, exhibiting traces of nervousness.

Feeling himself pretty strong, Blake now began on the base of ten; twice he lost, and then luck favoring him, the third time he won, so he got back all he was out and ten chips besides. So the play went on until two hundred chips had taken to themselves wings and had flown from the dealer over to Blake.

Then the deal was out, and the successful sharp reckoned up his wealth, much to the gambler's disgust.

"Two hundred and twenty-five dollars," he observed. "Well, as I am not anxious to play the hog, I guess I will cash up."

"Hol' on!" cried the dealer, in alarm; "ain't you going to give us a chance to git squar'?"

"Do you want me to break your durned little concern?" Blake demanded. "I am drawing out just in mercy to you. My luck is on the flood to-day, and if I keep on I will bu'st you, sure."

"Wal, you might gi'n us a chance to get hunk," the gambler responded, with a rueful glance at his own diminished pile of checks.

The fellow had boasted of a thousand dollars, but he had barely four hundred.

"You are not satisfied?"

"Nary time."

"Well, I am rather pressed for minutes, just now, and hain't got any time to waste, but I will tell you what I will do. My pile and yours are just about the same size; I will cut the cards with you for the two combined—the highest card takes the whole."

The dealer looked aghast at this proposition. What! risk all upon a single card—a single chance? No, not by a jugful! He had not the sublime confidence in his own luck that possessed Blake; but, as the other was firm, and would do nothing else, he was obliged to cash the checks and allow Blake to walk off with a clean two hundred dollars in hard cash. Violence, of course, was not to be thought of for a moment, for Blake was not only well-armed, but was backed by a pretty resolute-looking crowd, so that the despoiled gambler had nothing to do but to bear his loss with patience and resignation.

Blake, now being in possession of what funds he needed, proceeded to purchase the necessary supplies, and, while engaged in this duty, he requested his followers to hunt round the town and if possible find a man familiar with the rough, broken country around Table Mountain, to serve as a guide.

The search was a fruitless one, for, although there were quite a number of Californians in San Diego who were well acquainted with the region, they were all on friendly terms with the smugglers, and averse to the "strangers"—as the gold-hunters were generally designated.

Blake had requested the pencil man to keep the object of the expedition quiet; so it was supposed the party were going in search of gold, and although the old inhabitants of San Diego laughed at the idea that there was any gold in that locality, yet the miners thought something might be found in that direction, though they doubted it.

The provisions and ammunition bought and packed on the mules, which Blake had provided for the purpose, the expedition prepared to take up the line of march; but, at the very outset they encountered a formidable obstacle.

The alcalde, who from Blake's visit had received timely warning of the purpose of the adventurers, had, in the meantime, not been idle. He had hastened around town and gathered a force of some thirty well-armed men, and now, as the adventurers marched out of the town, drawn up in battle array on the outskirts they found the alcalde's army.

The old man had posted his men with a great deal of military skill, right across the road—the main body, with detachments in some little clumps of timber near at hand.

The Americans gazed at the warlike array in considerable astonishment, for it had never entered their heads that any one would dare to interfere with their purpose, and though the well posted force seemed to gaze upon them with hostile looks, yet they could hardly believe that the display was meant for them.

But, Blake knew right well what was in the mind of the Californian. At all hazards the alcalde was determined to prevent him from going to the rescue of the unfortunate girl, held captive by Captain Volcano.

"Look to your weapons, men; we are going to have trouble here!" he cried.

And the alcalde, perceiving that Blake was on hostile thoughts intent, thought it wise to say a few words.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE GUIDE.

THE Californian stepped forth in front of his men and lifted up his hands in token of peace, in what he intended to be a dignified and graceful manner, but, as he was short in stature and extremely gross in person, the adventurers received him with a murmur of derision, which annoyed the alcalde exceedingly.

"Withhold your fire, men, until I give the signal!" he exclaimed, frowningly, turning to his men. "I will speak a few words to these strangers. It is probable that they do not know what they are doing."

If the official thought to awe the adventurers by this speech he was woefully mistaken, for the gold-seekers had a most supreme contempt for the natives of the clime which they had invaded, lured onward by the scent of gold.

"A few words with you, my friends," the Californian continued; "it is my duty to ask you upon what errand are you bound, armed as you are?"

"That you are the alcalde of the town we do not doubt, but that you have any right to question us we do not admit," Blake answered, firmly. "So take your men out of the way or else there will be bloodshed. We are on the war-path, and we mean business, every time!"

And at this threatening speech the Americans all brandished their arms and uttered hoarse cries. For the first time the alcalde began to realize the extent of the task which he had taken upon himself when he had determined to prevent Blake and his men from leaving San Diego. He had a vain idea, though, that in his

official character the adventurers might be induced to listen and to heed his words.

"It is my duty to stop you; if I have been rightly informed you intend to cross the frontier and invade Mexican territory, and as alcalde of this town it is my duty to prevent you from committing such an outrage."

"Two minutes to draw off your men and allow us free passage, or we'll go through you like the lightning through a pine forest!" Blake cried, sternly. The famous red revolvers were in his hands and each and every man of his force had his pistols cocked, ready—eager for action.

The alcalde had heard of these terrible red revolvers; he knew what terrible fellows these gold-seekers were when their blood was up, and as he glanced, in a nervous sort of way, at his own men, he saw a dread of the coming contest written upon nearly every face. If the Americans did charge, as they threatened, his men would run like hares, he well knew.

The old man had to think quickly, for two minutes is a very short time indeed.

Blake had taken out the little silver watch he wore and was counting the time. When the two minutes had expired, he proceeded to replace the watch in his pocket.

"Hold on!" called the alcalde, understanding by this maneuver that time was up; "you are free to go, since you threaten force; but, your deeds be on your own heads. I have warned you, and if the Mexican soldiers cut you all to pieces, as they will surely do if you encounter them, you will not have anybody to blame but yourselves."

And as the official spoke, his men, without waiting for orders, quietly got out the road and withdrew to one side.

The gold-seekers received the alcalde's warning with a shout of derision; little fear had they of the "Greasers," either civil or military.

"Oh, never fear for us; we will give a good account of your friends if we happen to meet them!" Blake averred, as he marched past the Californians at the head of his men.

Straight onward the expeditionists proceeded, until they came to where the narrow trail leading toward Table Mountain bent off toward the southward; then they filed into the narrow, rugged way, and just as they did so, out from amid the bushes rose a slender youth, dressed roughly, and so sudden and unexpected was the movement that the adventurers started in alarm, while more than one hand clutched a revolver-butt.

"You want a guide, sir, to the smugglers' haunt on Table Mountain," spoke the boy, addressing Blake. "I will guide you well and faithfully, and I know every foot of the way."

The leader fixed his keen eyes intently upon the face of the youth for an instant, and, bold and fearless as were the black eyes of the lad, they sunk beneath the fixed scrutiny of the leader of the adventurers.

"Aha! You are the very fellow we want," Blake said, at last. "Go on a bit so that I can talk with you in private and see if you really know what you profess."

There was a restless, fearful look in the eyes of the youth as he obeyed the command.

Twenty paces on, the trail turned abruptly to the right, and around the bend was a little open space, just fit for a conference; there the boy, halting, turned and faced Blake.

"And now, my lad, in the first place your name?"

"I—Juan, sir," the lad replied, with a great deal of hesitation, which was apparently not called for by such a simple question.

"And how did you know that we wanted a guide?"

"Your men searched enough for one in the town."

"True; why did you not come forward then?"

"I had my reasons."

"And you prefer not to tell them?"

"Yes, that is the truth."

"Well, as long as you perform your duties all right, I suppose it isn't any of my business, but, what will you charge for the service?"

"I do—I do not know."

"It isn't for money then that you do it?"

"No, not for money," and the answer was given in a tone of suppressed passion that at once convinced Blake the suspicion he entertained was correct.

"For revenge, eh? You hate some one of this smuggler gang—Captain Volcano, perhaps?"

The eyes of the volunteer guide fairly snapped as the name fell upon her ears.

"Oho! sits the wind in that quarter, eh?" cried Blake. "Little one, it is no use to play at cross-purposes with me. I detected your disguise at once; your name is not Juan, but it is probably Juanita, and you are not a boy but a woman—an angry, jealous woman who seeks revenge upon the man who has deserted her for a newer beauty. The star of the alcalde's daughter has eclipsed yours."

"He promised me that I should be his bride a hundred times!" exclaimed the incensed and jealous girl, throwing aside all disguise. "Twenty times at least have I visited his mountain home and each and every time he has told me how

happy he would be when the time came for me to fly from my home and reign there as its queen."

"And he broke faith with you and took another girl?" suggested Blake, a peculiar look upon his face.

"Yes, only a short time ago he was all fire, but when he won my love and I was fool enough to confess that he was the master of my heart and that I was ready to fly with him to the end of the world, then, little by little, he seemed to cool off; I was eager to fly with him but he was not eager to take me. It is a humiliating confession for a woman to make but it is the truth, and now he flies with the alcalde's daughter; he deserts me and takes her. Señor, to get even with this false wretch I am ready to suffer the pain of a thousand deaths!"

Blake had listened to the angry woman's story with great attention. Possessed as he was of Captain Volcano's secret—a secret which the world at large was far from suspecting—he could have explained to the deserted and enraged woman why it was the gallant captain had not fulfilled his promise, but this flight with the alcalde's daughter he could not have explained.

The appearance of the girl was a lucky thing, though, for, without a guide, Blake fancied that it would be difficult to surprise the smugglers in their stronghold, but he was rather in doubt in regard to the extent of her information, so he resolved to question her.

"You know that the smugglers have two haunts?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, the upper and the lower; I know them both, and can guide you to either one of them safely and surely."

"But do you think we will be able to surprise them, for of course if they have timely warning of our approach they will be able to retreat."

"We can surprise them easily enough if they are not warned of our coming, for they never look for danger in the land direction."

"But, how can they be warned?"

"By boat from San Diego; the alcalde is in league with the smugglers, or at least all the town believes he is, and he will surely dispatch a messenger to warn the captain that your expedition has started."

"Very likely; but, as we will have the start of the boat and I should judge that the overland way is the shortest we ought to be able to surprise them before they can be warned."

"You can; but which camp do you seek?"

"The lower one."

"Come on then!"

Blake called to his followers and on they went.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SPY.

WHEN Blake had called up his men he had explained to them the urgent necessity for haste; so they pushed on as fast as possible, although the trail was rough and not favorable for speed.

Blake calculated shrewdly upon the chances, the alcalde believing that he would prevent the party from going, would not be apt to send a warning to the smugglers that danger threatened them, until after the failure of his attempt to stop the party; therefore Blake felt sure that he would succeed in reaching the haunt of Captain Volcano before he could receive any information that danger threatened; but while the adventurer had reckoned correctly in regard to the alcalde's movement that Captain Volcano would not be warned in time that a desperate and determined foe was on his track, there was a spy upon the track of the adventurers—a spy who had been secreted in a clump of bushes near at hand, and who had heard every word of the conference between the alcalde and Blake, and then, when the expedition had proceeded on its way, with snake-like motions the spy had followed. Crouched beneath a bush, he had overheard the conversation between Blake and the disguised woman, but when, under the guidance of the enraged Juanita the force again started on its way, the spy did not attempt to follow, but plunging through the rough and broken country to the right, headed direct for the wooded sides of Table Mountain.

Onward went the man, like one well acquainted with the way, and as he was going in a line as straight as the crow flies, while the trail which the adventurers pursued wound round and round like a wounded snake, it was morally certain that the spy would arrive at the retreat of the outlaws long in advance of the gold-seekers.

While this race for life was progressing, for most certainly it was such a struggle, and with more than one life pending on the issue, too, we will proceed at once to the smugglers' headquarters and see what is taking place there.

As described: after setting fire to the Fair Isabel with his own desperate band when he found that Blake had captured the craft, Captain Volcano had escaped in the boat, taking the captive girl with him.

A doleful reception greeted him on the shore from the beaten and disgusted smugglers, and for a few moments one and all of the band amused and consoled themselves by cursing the Fresh of Frisco and the evil luck which had

sent him to worry them in their mountain fastness.

The girl was placed in one of the log cabins—the same one by the way which had been her prison-house before, and the captain coolly announced that, in order to prevent her from escaping, he should occupy the same apartment.

In despair the girl tried one last effort to soften the iron-like heart of her captor.

"Why will you seek to win a love which can never be yours?" she exclaimed. "What benefit can it possibly be to you to persecute me in this horrible manner?"

"In the first place, I am determined that this man shall not have you, nor shall you have him, although I will confess that I myself do not care two straws for you," the captain replied, with some insolence of manner. "I did have something of a fancy for you, but that is all passed away."

The girl's face flushed with hope: if he did not care for her, surely he would not attempt to detain her a prisoner.

The smuggler chief saw the look and comprehended its meaning instantly.

"Oh, don't flatter yourself that I am going to let you go!" he warned. "I have taken too much trouble to bring you here, too much trouble to keep you to give you up now. Besides, independent of any love I might have had for you, I have another strong reason for wishing to make you my wife. Your father, the alcalde, is a very prudent and saving man; he has his nest very well feathered indeed, and you are his only heir; I have helped your father to acquire the greater part of this wealth, and it is only fair that I should have a share of it, one of these days, and that share I can only get by taking you; therefore, I have resolved to marry you whether you like it or not. After the ceremony is over you will be free to depart, but I doubt if any other man will care to take you then, and, even if there was a lover willing, I know that you are too good a daughter of the church to prove false to your marriage vows."

The girl's heart sunk within her breast; this man was a born demon, if there ever was one in this world.

Little sleep visited her eyes that night, and although she racked her brains until her head ached, no plan of escape could she conceive. There was only one hope for her: Blake, the man of undaunted nerve and courage, knew that she was a prisoner in the hands of Captain Volcano. She had perceived him in the boat, and had stretched out her hands to him, imploring his assistance, and she felt sure, from what she knew of him, that he would not be deaf to the appeal; but the task, perhaps, would be too great for him, for the girl was sensible enough to know that it would be no child's play to wrest her from the power of Captain Volcano.

Morning came at last, and the captain, pleading that he had urgent duties which required his attention, withdrew; hollow mockery—as if Margerite desired his presence.

The captain was a riddle to the girl, and she knew not what to make of him. At first he had been all fire and passion, and the girl trembled for herself when she found that she was helpless in his power; but now he had suddenly changed and was treating her with an icy coolness, as though the flames of an ardent passion had never burned within his breast. The girl was amazed and could not understand it, but she breathed more freely under the altered circumstances, although the smuggler chief had woven the web around her with such fiendish cunning that all the world would surely believe she was his victim. And Blake—would he believe it? This thought troubled Margerite more than anything else.

The smugglers had bandaged up their wounds, buried their dead, made those of the gang who were badly hurt as comfortable as possible, and then had held a grand council to deliberate over the events which had lately taken place, and, amid much discussion, one determination had been unanimously arrived at—that Blake, the man who had done all the mischief, must be punished.

But it was the old story of the rats wanting to bell the cat; all agreed that it was extremely desirable, and yet, no one was able to suggest a feasible plan to accomplish the feat.

Just about noon the outlaw band were startled by an unexpected visitor. Out from the deep woods that fringed the mountain-side came the old Indian, Cajo, the conjurer.

He came onward like one quite certain of his reception, and the gang, all of whom were well acquainted with the old man, looked at him in astonishment.

The Indian went straight up to Captain Volcano, and whispered in his ear:

"Foes are near; they are crawling like snakes through the thicket! Come apart, and Cajo will tell his story."

Much impressed by the mysterious communication, the captain rose at once and followed the Indian, who led the way to a clump of timber where they were partially screened from the view of the others, and completely out of earshot.

The captain had always regarded the con-

jurer with suspicion; something about the man puzzled him, but what it was, or why it should affect him so, was more than he could explain.

"Now then, what foes threaten?" asked the smuggler chief.

"The white man who wears the red revolvers."

The captain started as though a snake had stung him. Was the red revolver man his evil genius, that he followed on his track so persistently?

"And with him come many braves," and the Indian held up the fingers of both hands, one after the other, to denote the number.

"They are coming here?"

"Yes; after the girl."

"We must be gone then; but, why do you take the trouble to give me this warning? What is it to you?" Volcano asked, regarding the old man with a steady gaze.

"I wear the same totem on my breast that is imprinted on yours," replied the old man, in a mysterious whisper.

The blood flushed up into the face of the captain until it was as red as the face of the Indian, and then, dying away, was succeeded by an unearthly paleness. The blow was so sudden that it staggered him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN PURSUIT.

"WHAT know you of me or of the totem, as you call it, graven on my breast?" the captain demanded, harshly, but though his manner was rough and threatening, it was plain that he had received a terrible shock.

The old chief grinned and nodded his head after the style of a Chinese mandarin.

"Me know—me great medicine-man; and he know, too, the red revolver man," he muttered, mysteriously.

Again the quick red flush swept over the cheeks and mantled on the forehead of Volcano.

"He knows that I bear the marks on my breast?" he exclaimed. The captain was certain that Blake did know it, for his wound had evidently been dressed by the adventurer on board the Isabel, and of course that operation could not be performed without perceiving the marks on the breast.

"He knows the secret—the secret that carries death with it to all that learn it; his feet have entered upon the trail that leads only to the grave."

The captain, hard to convince, could not bring himself to believe that the Indian really knew anything of the marks tattooed upon his breast, although it was incomprehensible how the chief guessed that any such things were there.

"You are a wise man, they say, and if you are so wise perhaps you can tell me what these marks are of which you speak."

Without a word the old man dropped upon his knees and with his red and skinny forefinger he traced some strange characters in the sand.

First came a wavy line with a smaller one starting from it and pointing to the north; then came the following characters—"2. N W. T T T."

And as he finished the last T, old Cajo glared up with a cunning smile in the face of the captain.

"There is one symbol missing," he said, "a sign which did not exist in the original, but which ought to have been placed there by the designer of the cipher, but he was blind and could not see into the future."

"And what sign should end the thing?"

"A coffin to signify death!" was the startling response. "And it has come to them all, too. To Carisee, who devised the cipher and was the first to die; to Juana, the daughter of Carisee, who was the next to vanish from the world."

"Juana is not dead!" exclaimed the captain, abruptly.

"Does she live? and if so, where? Can you show her to me? Can mortal man show her to me?"

And as the Indian looked at the captain with his glaring eyes, the latter fancied that he saw the glitter of insanity in the restless orbs.

"The Frenchman died; he, too, bore the mark on his breast, and he came from afar in search of the secret mine, and death marked him as a prey. The Red Revolver took the charm from the dead body of the Frenchman; I was hid in the bushes and saw it all, and some day the fiend will put it into his head to engrave the totem on his breast, and then he, too, will die."

"But you have it on yours, you say, and yet you are not dead," the captain remarked, regarding the old man with a steadfast look.

"Oh, yes, I am; I have been dead for nearly twenty years," and the Indian made this assertion with a very solemn face.

The captain perceived that it would be wasting time to attempt to unravel the mystery of the totem, and so gave up the attempt.

"How soon will this force be here?"

"Within an hour."

"We have no time to lose, then; we will take to the water, and as we will take care not to

leave any boats behind us, I think it will trouble this adventurer and his gang to follow us. Now, what shall I pay you for this service?"

The Indian rose slowly to his feet and drew his tattered blanket around him with a dignified air.

"I ask no pay; I am but a blind instrument carrying out the will of fate. It is not time for you to die, yet," and the old red-man stalked in gloomy dignity away.

The captain watched him until he disappeared amid the trees; then, with a sudden start, he roused himself from the abstraction into which he had fallen.

"Bah! I am a fool to pay any attention to this madman's ravings!" he exclaimed. "But his knowledge is wonderful, though. He is no red-skin, but who and what is he? I must set my wits to work to find out as soon as I am free of this cursed affair."

Then the young chief hurried back to his companions and told them of the warning which he had received. All was instantly bustle and confusion; the approach of the adventurer with ten or twelve good men at his back was no joke; but, luckily, the sea remained open as a way of retreat, and some twenty miles down the coast was the Mexican town of San Luis, with the people and authorities of which the smugglers were on most excellent terms.

San Luis was a little fishing-town, guarded by a 'doby fort on the hillside, which was garrisoned by a detachment of twenty-five or thirty men. This force was supposed to be stationed at San Luis, both as a sort of an army of observation to see that the detested North Americans did not come over the frontier, and to suppress smuggling; but, as the commandant of the town (as the commanding officer of the post was called) was deeply interested in the illegal operations, and a goodly number of the inhabitants of the place derived the best part of their living from the smugglers, it was evident that no matter how much the Mexican authorities were desirous of putting down the smugglers, neither the commander of the frontier post, nor the inhabitants of the town, could be relied upon to offer much assistance in this very laudable endeavor.

To San Luis then the hunted men determined to retreat. As they reckoned, it was the most unlikely thing in the world that the adventurer should discover whither they had retreated, and if he did, with his ten or twelve men he would surely never think of attempting to storm the Castle of San Luis, for by this imposing name the little round 'doby fort was called.

The boats were instantly got ready and the smugglers embarked at once. Two of the gang were so badly hurt that they could not be moved without danger and one of the women of the band volunteered to remain and wait upon them; three women followed the fortunes of the smugglers.

"I am not afraid of the ladrones!" declared the woman, who was a big strapping Amazon, evidently with negro blood in her veins.

The smugglers, taking particular care to take all the boats, so that it would be impossible for their pursuers to follow them, bent to their oars and away they went.

They pushed straight out to sea so as to have plenty of room to double around the projecting point a couple of miles lower down the coast, and, just as the little fleet disappeared around the point Blake and his adventurers came creeping cautiously in to surprise the smugglers, but perceiving no signs of life except the woman sitting in front of one of the cabins, they abandoned their caution and came boldly forward.

From the appearance of things Blake expected that the band were absent and that his scheme of surprise had failed. He could hardly believe, though, that the band had managed to get news of his approach, so swiftly had he advanced; he was more inclined to think that accident alone had defeated his well-laid plans.

He had a vague hope, however, that he might find the alcalde's daughter in one of the cabins, but the calmness of the woman—the utter absence of all surprise, and the scornful and triumphant manner in which she glared at him and his band as they surrounded her, went far to convince him that, in some mysterious way, the gang had been warned of his approach and had fled to avoid him. How the warning could have reached the band was a puzzle, but he thought he might be able to extract some information from the woman.

"Examine the cabins and see if there is any one inside," was Blake's first command.

And while his men proceeded to do this he commenced to examine the Amazon.

"Where are the men?" he asked.

"Find out!" she retorted.

"Tie her to a tree and score her back well with a stick!" suggested one of the men, provoked by this impudence.

She glared vindictively at the speaker, but in her heart was a little afraid that the adventurers might offer violence.

Blake hesitated; he hated to fight with a woman, but he was determined to obtain the information, somehow, and just at this moment those who had been examining the cabins returned with the information that there were

only some wounded men in them. But the sharp-eyed pencil man had guessed at the truth, noting the absence of all the boats.

"They have given leg-bail by water, Cap!" he exclaimed. "The boats are gone, and I reckon the odds are about ten to one that they have lit out for San Luis, the biggest cutthroat town on the lower coast!"

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE WEDDING.

CAPTAIN VOLCANO had not neglected the captive. When the flight was determined upon he had gone to Margerite and told her that they were about to take a trip southward by boat, and that he hoped she would have the good sense to go along quietly, as any resistance would be fruitless.

"Of course I presume you understand that, with these men, my word is law," he said in conclusion.

The unfortunate girl bowed her head in sorrow; she knew that her captor spoke the truth and that she could not in reason expect to receive aid from his rude and lawless men.

Resistance was useless; naught was left her but compliance. So, without a word of remonstrance, she followed the captain to the boat.

It was a bright and pleasant day; the sea was like glass almost, the only motion being a long undulating swell; and under different circumstances Margerite most surely would have enjoyed the trip. The smugglers, rough and bearded men though they were, desperadoes and outlaws every one of them, joked and chatted with each other with that vivacity common to the native Californians, who, in their make-up, have a great deal of both the tiger and the monkey. Any one to listen to their conversation would never have taken them to be the scoundrels they were; and after the little fleet rounded the wooded point and therefore were free from observation, the rascals lifted up their voices and sung like so many nightingales, endeavoring thus to beguile the weariness of the voyage.

Margerite had a suspicion, of course, that the departure was for the purpose of evading pursuit, but she had no idea that the party bent upon her rescue, headed by the sport, were so near, although in her "heart of hearts" she felt as certain that Blake would attempt to rescue her from the power of her captor as she did that she was a living, breathing girl.

Southward went the boats, propelled at quite a rapid rate by the stout-limbed smugglers. And now, at last, Captain Volcano felt at ease. No fears of pursuit were in his mind; the trackless water they were traversing left no telltale trail behind, and he did not believe it likely any one would guess he had fled to the Mexican town for refuge.

"And even if he comes," he muttered to himself, his mind still intently fixed upon his adversary, and the possibility of his pursuit, "shut up in the 'doby fort I can surely laugh to scorn all his efforts. He will be in an enemy's country, too, where behind every tree and rock will lurk a foe eager to cut him off. If he does suspect whither I have gone, and follows me up in his blind courage, it will only be rushing to his death; and he must not die!" he muttered, hoarsely, through his firm-set teeth. "What a fool he is to risk his life for the sake of this baby-faced girl!" And the captain, glaring at Margerite's pretty features, now depressed by sadness, curled his lip in scorn. "A fool! he is a madman to risk his precious life for the sake of such a wax-face. I will end it soon, though. I must make the girl mine so as to constitute myself the heir to the old alcalde's estate; and when that is accomplished, if Blake still continues in his chase I will put a knife into her and so end the matter. The crying doll! I hate her now, with all my heart, and I wish she had been laid in the grave before she had met the eyes of this gold-seeker."

We have set down these disjointed mutterings exactly as they fell from the lips of this strange being, who was a riddle even to himself.

It was a long and tiresome pull, even to practiced oarsmen as the smugglers were, but the twenty miles were accomplished at last, and as the boat swept round the little point which the natives dignified by the title of cape, the town of San Luis appeared fair before them.

A miserable little settlement to be designated a city, for so it was termed, the city of San Luis; not three hundred inhabitants, all told, in the place, and the houses in which the "citizens" lived were a miserable collection of huts, nearly all built out of "doby,"—as the clay-colored sun-burnt bricks common to the region are called. On a little elevation, right back of the town, and surrounded by an extensive plain, almost wholly bare of trees, and with hardly a bush even, was the fort, the castle of San Luis, as it was grandiloquently called. It was a very small affair, built out of the sun-burnt bricks, merely a thick, circular wall, a hundred feet in diameter, perhaps, surrounded a square-roofed, old-fashioned Mexican house, with a court-yard in the center, the walls loop-holed for musketry, and a high parapet on the roof, so as to afford protection to marksmen behind it.

Three brass pieces, dating back to the era of the Spanish conquest almost, and bearing upon their breeches the castle and keys of old Spain, were mounted *en barbette* upon the wall.

These "formidable" pieces of artillery were supposed to threaten destruction to any hostile ship-of-war which should dare to approach the town by sea.

Against any common foe unprovided with artillery, the fort was tolerably strong, as, in case of the outer walls being successfully assailed, the garrison could retreat into the square house in the center, the citadel, and a dozen well-armed and resolute men there could easily hold a couple of hundred at bay.

Don Caesar de Hidalgo, colonel in the army of Mexico, with a garrison of twenty-five men, held the fort. If the Mexican army is not large in numbers, it makes up for it by having plenty of officers; hence it followed that a colonel commanded a "regiment" of twenty-five men, and in the twenty-five, a major, two captains and two lieutenants were included.

It was really a delightful life these gallant officers led. The garrison duties were light, and the military men, from one week's end to another, did but drink liquor and gamble among themselves and with the citizens who were lucky enough to have any money to lose, although that didn't make much difference, for if the gamblers didn't have any money, so strong was their passion, they gambled on credit.

The smugglers and the inhabitants of the town were old friends, for it was the honest citizens of San Luis who provided the mules, and did the freighting business for the contraband goods, and reports said that on more than one occasion, the officers of the garrison, who were supposed to be stationed on the coast for the express purpose of preventing smuggling, not only winked at the illegal operations, for which they got a share of the spoils, but in slight disguises had actually assisted in landing the smuggled goods and transporting them inland.

As they approached the beach, Captain Volcano beckoned to the old smuggler to approach, and, as his boat pulled up alongside, he whispered some instruction to him; then, in obedience to his orders, his boat, instead of making a landing like the rest, was pulled straight down along the shore, heading for a little wooded point which projected into the water about a mile below the town.

A new hope had arisen in the breast of the girl as the boats had pulled in to the beach, but this maneuver crushed it. She knew that it was the town of San Luis which they were approaching; she could see the glitter of uniforms on the beach, for quite a little group of idlers had collected on the shore to watch the arrival of the boats, and as officers and soldiers, the world over, are supposed to be gentlemen, she had determined to appeal to the military men for protection.

But, her captor had sharp eyes; he had noticed the change of expression on the girl's face, and was shrewd enough to guess what were her thoughts; so, when his boat arrived at the point, he directed his men to pull around it, so as to hide the boat from the town. The point once rounded, the oarsmen, obedient to command, laid on their oars and waited, only a hundred yards or so from the beach.

For half an hour at the least the boat remained stationary, and then a cluster of men appeared on the shore amid the trees, and the moment he discovered them the captain ordered a landing to be made.

The heart of the girl sunk within her, for, by the side of the old smuggler chief on the shore, she saw a priest. And, as the boat approached the shore, and she could distinguish the face of the father, she saw at once from the expression upon it that she had nothing to hope for from him. It was plain, even to the girl's unpracticed eyes, that he was one of those coarse, brutal, drunken disgraces to the priesthood, whose presence in Mexico has been her greatest curse, for the past hundred years. Of course such a man was a mere libel on the name of religion, and could not possibly remain without being "silenced," except in some remote corner.

The keel of the boat grated on the beach, and the captain assisted the trembling girl to land.

"This holy father will solemnize our marriage," the captain said. "I want to do justice to the lady, father; hence this want of ceremony. She fled from her home with me, and as we have shared the same apartment ever since, I want to shield her from all reproach by making her my wife."

"Very praiseworthy, indeed," grunted the holy man, who didn't care a copper for the circumstances, but was eager to earn the fee which he had been promised.

The poor girl was crushed by the weight of shame which Volcano's words thrust upon her, but she rallied enough to remonstrate feebly.

But the father didn't pay the least attention to her; he pulled out his ritual from beneath his greasy robes and began to read the marriage service.

"No, no!" the girl shrieked, wildly, "I will not be wedded thus! Oh, Heaven save me!" and then she fainted.

But, this made no alteration in the programme; the old smuggler held the girl up and the father went on with the service. And so the two were wedded!

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE COMMANDANTE.

THE captain had provided for everything—ring as well as priest, and although it was like putting the golden circlet on the finger of a dead woman, what did the arch-plotter care? He had accomplished his purpose; the girl was his wife by the rites of the church, and, although such a ceremony as they had just gone through might not be considered strictly legal, and might be annulled by persistent effort, yet, who was there besides the girl and her lover, Blake, perhaps, to bother their heads about the matter? The old alcalde desired the union; the father who performed the ceremony would swear to almost anything provided that he was paid enough for it; and with what face could the unknown adventurer demand that a marriage between a son and daughter of the true faith be annulled that he might wed the lady—a union that the church would never sanction. Besides, now that the mischief was done, would Blake care for the girl since she had become the captain's victim?

One of the gang ran to the sea-shore, and bringing back a supply of water in the crown of his broad-brimmed hat, sprinkled the face of the maid, and soon she recovered. And the first thing that met her eyes when her senses returned to her was the golden circlet upon her finger, and, as her eyes fell upon it, a shudder shook her frame.

"The ceremony is over, my dear," Captain Volcano said, with the most courtly politeness; "you are now my wife, and I defy either man or devil to take you from me, so you had better make the best of it and not force me to use unpleasant measures, which I am sure will be disagreeable to both of us."

What could the girl do? She was fairly in the toils, and she felt that, struggle as she might, she would only bind the net tighter and tighter to her. So she humbly bowed her head in sad despair.

"Did you tell the commandante that we craved his hospitality for a few days?" Volcano asked, turning to the old smuggler.

"Yes, and he replied that the castle and all it contained was at your disposal."

This is the true Spanish-Mexican style, when a man "gives you all he possesses," and then stabs you in the back in order that he may help himself to your valuables at the first opportunity.

Paying the priest his fee, which the fellow received with a profusion of thanks—for it was not often for a simple wedding service that he received a golden ounce—the captain dismissed him; then, taking the lady's arm within his own he set out for the castle, followed by the rest of the band.

Marguerite did not resist, in the least, but went along as meekly as a lamb to the slaughter, but in the heart of the girl grew up a wild and fearful idea. Captain Volcano, although he acted with a demon-like cunning, was but mortal; a knife-thrust would give him a passport to the other world as quickly as though he was not such a devil in artifice, and with her desperate hand she determined at a single blow to transform her wedding-couch into the gory bier of death.

She had a weapon, for the little dagger which was thrust through the rich coil of her rare black hair was not only an ornament but a tool of death as well, for the steel pin attached to it was as big as a good sized bodkin, amply sufficient to let out a life if the victim was stricken in the right place.

And so, when the girl went along so quietly, the captain, with all his shrewdness, was deceived. He fancied that Marguerite, worn out with the struggle, was conquered; he did not guess that her calmness was the calmness of a terrible despair.

Straight to the castle the party proceeded, and at the gate they were received by the commandante, Don Cesar de Hidalgo, in the most courtly manner.

The Mexican officer was a tall, middle-aged man, with an ugly, treacherous face, ornamented with the most ferocious pair of mustaches and imperial imaginable.

The captain introduced Marguerite as his wife; the commandante bowed almost to the ground, and licked his thick lips as he noticed the wondrous beauty of the girl.

Apartments had been prepared for the reception of the guests, and they were at once conducted to them. The captain escorted Marguerite to hers, and then excusing himself, returned to hold a conversation with the Mexican officer, taking the precaution, however, to turn the key in the lock and then to place the key securely in his pocket.

The commandante was all prepared to receive his guest. A flask of wine was on the table and two glasses were already filled.

"You lucky dog!" the Mexican exclaimed, as the other seated himself at the table and took up his glass; "where, in the name of Venus, did you pick up that magnificent creature?"

"She is lovely, eh?"
"Lovely! She is superb!"
"You know De Salvador, the alcalde of San Diego?"

"Oh, yes, I know of him, for, strange as you may think it, since I have been stationed here I have never crossed the frontier."

"She is De Salvador's daughter."
"And she is really your wife, eh? No light of love affair about it?" the commandante asked, quite anxiously.

"Oh, no, not the least doubt about the marriage; Father Pedro performed the ceremony."

"That drunken beast!" the officer exclaimed, in the most contemptuous manner. "Why didn't you get a decent man while you were about it? That fellow ought to be unfrocked, and he will be when his superiors find out what a rascal he is."

"He answered my purpose," Volcano answered.

"And didn't the lady object to the varlet?"

"Oh, yes; in fact, she objected to the whole affair. You see, my dear fellow, there is just a little bit of mystery connected with my wedding. The lady, to whom I have paid court for quite a long time, with her father's full consent, took it into her beautiful head to look disdainfully upon my suit, and, of all things in the world, to fall in love with one of these rascally gold-diggers who are swarming into San Diego on their way to these new gold mines, like a horde of locusts."

The commandante nodded. The news of the gold-fever had reached him, although such things make very little impression upon the Mexicans, who, living in a country rich with mines, are too indolent to attempt to develop the treasure-houses of Nature.

"She was mad after the fellow, so her father concluded that I had better carry her off and marry her as quickly as possible, whether she was agreeable or not, and I have done so."

"A sensible thing!" exclaimed the officer, approvingly; "why should a man trouble his head about the whims of a silly girl?"

"The girl is mine, safe as church can bind her; and now, my good friend, I will make you my father confessor. Now that I have the girl I don't want her," the captain announced, with perfect coolness, much to the astonishment of the other.

"You don't want her?" the other cried.
"Why, is it possible that you have tired so soon of such a gorgeous creature?"

"Exactly! I am tired of her; it doesn't take me long to tire of women," the captain remarked, with a weary sort of yawn. "I took her simply because I had made up my mind that this cursed gold-hunter shouldn't have her; and then, too, by marrying her I become the heir to all her father's wealth, for so it was agreed between the alcalde and myself. But, here comes another aspect to the affair: I have reliable information that this American has gathered together a party of his fellows, and is on his way to attack me at Table Mountain, with the idea of taking the girl from me; so, to checkmate that move I took boat and came down here, but it is possible that, if the fellow suspects I am here, he will push on."

"Oh, no!" the commandante exclaimed.
"He can hardly be as mad as that! If he crosses the frontier with arms in his hand he and all his band risk their necks. If he came in my way I should make very short work of such marauders."

"He will come in your way, for I feel a presentiment that he will push on and attempt to storm our position here."

The Mexican started to his feet in astonishment.

"Oh, he will not dare!"

"Yes, he will; he is a reckless dare-devil."

"How many men has he with him?"

"Ten or a dozen."

"And does he think with ten or a dozen men to take this post, right in the teeth of the whole town, too, who of course the moment he began an attack would swarm upon his rear?"

"He will most likely make the attempt. His idea will be to make a sudden dash, take the place by surprise, get hold of the girl and then retreat as abruptly as he came."

"I can hardly believe that such a wild idea could enter the head of any one," the Mexican protested. "Although, as you say, if we were not prepared for such a thing, it would be possible that such a bold dash might prove successful, but now that we are on our guard—"

"It cannot succeed, eh?"

"No, sir; and not only that, but I will lay such a trap for these rascals that if they ever walk into it, I give you my word as a soldier that not one of them will ever get out alive."

"That is as it should be," the captain observed; "but, one man I wish saved, and that is the leader of the expedition—this dare-devil Blake; you will know him by his red revolvers."

"Oho! you want a chance to talk to the gentleman at your leisure, perhaps?" the commandante remarked, with a ferocious smile.

"Yes, perhaps; and now, if you will give me your assistance in the affair I will tell you what I will do: I have no use for this doll-face

beauty; to tell you the truth, she has already cost me so much trouble that I fairly hate the sight of her. I will turn her over to you—that is if you can persuade her to accept your protection."

"Oh, I will persuade her, in time, no doubt," the other replied.

Both being consummate rascals, it did not take them long to understand each other.

CHAPTER XXXV. A BOLD MOVEMENT.

CAPTAIN VOLCANO was right; Blake had resolved to follow the girl clear to San Luis, and, if possible, by a bold attack rescue her from the power of the man who had played so desperate a game to gain possession of her.

The pencil man, when he discovered that the smugglers had abandoned their haunt and that there wasn't a boat upon the beach, instantly concluded that the alcalde had succeeded in getting a messenger with a warning to the smugglers before their arrival.

"So, Captain Volcano and the rest of the gang have gone to San Luis, eh?" Blake said, addressing the virago.

"You had better go there and find out!" was the insolent reply.

"Cap, I say, lemme cut her ears off. Jes' a leetle slice offen her tongue, too!" exclaimed Nixey, drawing his knife as if he meant what he said.

The woman, jumping to her feet, drew a long and wicked-looking knife, seeing which the miners set up a shout.

"Form a ring and let 'em fight it out!" yelled one, in delight. "I'll go my pile on the gal, you bet!"

The disguised girl touched Blake's arm and drew him to one side.

"If you wish to go to San Luis," she said, "I know the way and I will guide you safely. I have been to San Luis often; my sister lives there. Captain Volcano and the commandante of the town are on the best of terms. There is a small fort there on the hillside which is called the castle of San Luis, and it is generally garrisoned by twenty or thirty soldiers."

"And do you think it is probable the captain has taken the girl to the fort?" Blake asked.

"Yes; if he is afraid of being pursued, he would be pretty certain to seek shelter there."

"And you are well acquainted with the road thither?"

"Oh yes; every foot of the way; it is but to continue on in the broad trail we quitted to come here."

"Very well; we will keep our own counsel for the present; there is no knowing how many spies are lurking near."

Then Blake returned to where his men were amusing themselves by bantering the woman, and she, by this time, perceiving that she really was not in any bodily danger, had put up her knife and was scowling sullenly at them.

"Oh, ain't she a beauty without paint or powder!" one of the big, bluff, brawny miners exclaimed, just as Blake came. "Durn my picture if I wouldn't give a heap of rocks to come sparkin' sich a lovely heifer as you are!" And the rest all roared at the idea.

"Come, boys; we must take the back trail, and we'll call again when the folks are home!" Blake announced.

The "boys" fired a parting volley of jeers at the woman, who answered by taunting them with being a set of cowardly "gringos"—the Mexican term of contempt for the outside barbarians—and followed in Blake's footsteps.

But when the party arrived at the main trail, Blake halted them and in a few words explained the situation.

"The captain and his gang have fled with the girl to San Luis, and they have all probably taken refuge with the commandante of the town in a little mud-brick fort on the hill near the city. Now then I propose to make a raid into San Luis, into that fort and tear the girl right out of the hands of the Mexicans. It is a mighty desperate thing, mind you; maybe it is on the cards for nary man of us to get out of San Luis alive; that is something we have got to take our chances on, and I don't want any man here to go into the thing with his eyes shut. It is a mighty big risk, and I for one wouldn't think any man was showing the white feather if he hesitated to go into the affair. I don't want to persuade any one to go against his judgment. I am going because I don't value my life at the turning over of a hair, and I had just as soon die as live. Now, make your election, gentlemen; like the Spanish captain I will draw a line in the sand:—all that are with me will step over it; all that decide not to go remain on this side, and God be with you, boys, for I cannot blame you!"

Then Blake, with his bowie-knife, drew a line in the sand, and, stepping over it, walked off a few paces, purposely keeping his back to the rest for it was not in the man to persuade any of them to venture upon the desperate quest.

There was the sound of heavy feet shuffling in the sand, and then the cheery voice of the pencil man spoke:

"The election is over, cap; s'posen you count noses."

Blake turned. Every man had crossed the line! The eyes of the adventurer sparkled; to use the frontier saying, such men as these would do to tie to.

"Boys, I feel proud of this token of confidence!" he exclaimed, "and if we don't clean out these Greasers it will be because they are better men than I think they are. Now, then, we must proceed with caution, for we don't want to get the whole town up in arms against us. If we can strike them without their expecting it, why, they will not have any opportunity to prepare for the stroke, and the suddenness of the thing may give us success."

So it was arranged that the boy, as the rest supposed the disguised woman to be, who was dressed like a Mexican, and Nixey, who was also attired in a nondescript dress, so that he might pass for a herdsman, should go on ahead of the rest, and if travelers were encountered, who might be apt to turn back and give the alarm, simple signals were arranged to warn the main body to conceal themselves until the travelers had passed by.

But, few and far between are the travelers on the roads north of San Luis, and not a single soul did the expedition encounter.

They had halted once on the march to partake of some refreshment, and so it was just at the shut of day when the party arrived at the edge of the barren sandy plain, which stretched fully a mile to the northward from the town.

Blake selected a secure retreat in the woods, at some little distance from the trail along which the party had come, and they all prepared to make themselves comfortable until darkness arrived. In the gloom of the evening the disguised woman could make her way into the town without exciting observation, and, as she explained to Blake, she had a good excuse to offer to her relatives in regard to her visit in disguise to San Luis.

"They know there has been a love affair between Captain Volcano and myself, and no doubt by this time they expect that I am happily married to the villain," she said, with flashing eyes, unable to restrain her anger whenever she thought of her wrongs. "It is the most likely thing in the world, then, now that he has come to San Luis with another woman, that I should follow him, anxious to learn whether I have been betrayed or not. Trust me to learn all needful particulars and to so explain matters that no one will have the slightest suspicion of my real object in coming to the town."

Blake felt perfect faith that the woman's cunning would be keen enough to accomplish her object, and he so expressed himself; and he further told her to take plenty of time in her mission, as he said:

"Even if everything is favorable, we will not make a movement until after midnight; we will imitate the red-skins, who always time their attack to occur two hours or so after midnight, because it is at that time that sleep is soundest."

"I will not return until I have learned all that is necessary," she replied; then she glided away like a specter in the gloom.

Blake returned to the men, arranged for sentinels to prevent their being surprised by any wanderer who might happen to stray within the wood, and then recommending the "boys" to get all the sleep they could, as they were likely to have warm work after midnight, threw himself on the ground and sunk to rest, almost as calmly and peacefully as an infant.

A better ally than the angry, revengeful Californian woman Blake could not have found for a hundred square miles. She was quick-witted, well acquainted with the country, and withal, burning with an almost fiendish desire to be avenged upon the man who had first won and then scorned her love.

But, as we have seen, this was not an unusual trick with the gallant smuggler captain; as soon as he had fairly got the girl he fancied into his possession—he seemed to care nothing more for her.

The woman reached the house of her relative without exciting any attention, yet, as she walked carelessly through the streets of the illy-lighted town, she could plainly see that something out of the common run was afoot. Every now and then, too, she encountered one of the smuggler gang, but, thanks to her disguise, and the ease with which she wore it, she did not excite suspicions in the breast of any one.

She found her sister terribly enraged to think that the captain had slighted her, and soon was in possession of all she wished to know, and on her return through the town she managed to pick up a trifle of knowledge besides.

It was to be plot and counterplot.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DESPERATE MOVEMENT.

THE night was an exceedingly dark one, for the moon did not rise until quite late, and as the Mexican commandante remarked to Captain Volcano—if the Americans were in the neighborhood and meditated an attack upon the fort, they could not have had a better night for the purpose.

The two had set their wits to work and had arranged a cleverly designed plan to entrap the attackers.

No extra sentinels were posted, so that the Americans might take the alarm, for the plan was to induce the attacking party to venture inside the walls of the fort, under the idea that they were surprising the garrison; then the old smuggler chief, who, with some thirty picked men recruited from among the inhabitants of the town, was concealed in the nearest house to the fort, would rush out and attack the assailants in the rear while they were endeavoring to force an entrance to the citadel.

If this plan succeeded, the attacking force would be caught between two fires. The garrison, on the alert and fully prepared for the attack, would surely be able to hold their own, protected by the strong 'doby wall, while the assailants, attacked in the rear, would be pretty certain to become panic-stricken. In fact, as the commandante remarked:

"If we do succeed in getting them to venture into the trap, there is not the slightest doubt that we shall slaughter them like sheep."

Of course it was mere guesswork in regard to the attack, for neither the smugglers nor the Mexicans had any certain information that the Americans were in the neighborhood, and they did not dare to send out spies to ascertain whether they were or not for fear of frightening them away, for it was their game to invite an attack, feeling sure that they would prove the victors in the struggle.

But when the midnight hour came and the rising moon began to dispel the darkness, the watchers came to the conclusion that there was very little danger of an attack that night.

"We will only have our trouble for our pains," the Mexican officer remarked, rolling a cigarette between his fingers. "If an attack was meditated they would not wait for the moon to rise, but would avail themselves of the darkness to cover their advance."

The captain agreed that there was very little danger, that night.

"We will remain on the alert until one, though," the commandante suggested, "then, if there is no sign of danger we may as well retire to rest."

Though the captain coincided, yet he did not feel satisfied. A presentiment of danger filled his soul. He had no reason to expect danger and could not have explained why it was that he was haunted by the apprehension, but the feeling was there nevertheless.

The two chatted and smoked until one came, then the Mexican advised that they could make a tour of observation, and if there were no signs of the Americans, they could retire to rest with tranquil minds.

The two went forth. The moon was up, full and strong, although her light was obscured every now and then by passing clouds, for the sky was cumbered with heavy and dark masses of vapor, seemingly presaging a storm.

The two made the rounds, only to find everything as quiet as quiet could be; not even a mouse was stirring, as the sentinel posted in front of the fort gate asserted.

The old smuggler, whom they visited in his concealment, said the same thing.

"No danger to-night!" he declared. "If the rascals are in the neighborhood and intended to attack they would never have waited until the moon came up."

"They might not," Volcano observed, dubiously, "yet, as they are strangers here, and therefore cannot know anything of the ground, the darkness, it seems to me, would rather be a disadvantage than otherwise. The moon would afford them light so that they could see what they were about."

"And also reveal their numbers, and as there can't possibly be more than a handful of them, it would decidedly be bad policy, in my estimation, for them to attack in the night," the commandante averred, and as the old smuggler coincided with him, the captain was silenced, although not convinced.

The two returned to their quarters, cautioning the sentinel as they passed in at the gate not to relax in his vigilance. The sentinel's instructions were to discharge his musket upon the first intimation of danger and retreat to the citadel, taking particular care to leave the gate open behind him, the idea being to entice the Americans within the walls, when the smugglers and citizens could close up behind them and cut off all retreat.

Before they retired the two ascended to the roof, which was flat and served for a promenade, after the fashion peculiar to Mexico, and with sharp eyes surveyed the surrounding country. The low flat plain, almost treeless, and only dotted here and there with a few small clumps of bushes, offered very little means of concealment to a skulking foe, and keenly as the pair looked no signs of danger could they see.

"We are wasting time and we may as well get to bed," the commandante observed, with a yawn.

Again the captain swept the horizon with a long, lingering look, but, suspicious as he was that there was mischief afoot, was obliged to confess that there was no appearance of it, perceptible to the sight.

The two sought their couches. The captain had been provided with two connecting rooms;

in the inner one the captive girl reposed; in the outer one Volcano threw himself upon a stuffed piece of furniture a cross between a sofa and a Turkish divan, all dressed as he was, and in ten minutes was sound asleep.

It speedily ran through the garrison, who had been on the alert, arms in hand, ready for the fray, that there wasn't any danger of an attack, and all retired to rest.

At two o'clock the only soul awake in or near the fort was the sentry pacing his weary rounds, and the captain of the watch, who sat in the guard-room of the citadel, smoking.

Half-past two the watch commander began to nod; the sentinel was not to be relieved until three, and the captain thought it no harm to snatch a few winks during the half-hour.

But, at half-past two, the danger which Captain Volcano had anticipated arrived.

Blake, ignorant of the locality, had waited for the moon to come up full and strong so that he might have light for his attack. He had been warned by the disguised woman that the old smuggler chief was enlisting men in the town, and that meant, of course, that an attack was feared, and that they were on their guard against it, and with that wisdom natural to the man born to command, he penetrated the plans of the foe. He guessed that the idea was when he made the attack for the smugglers and their allies to take him in the rear, and as he was determined to attack he must devise some plan to set at naught the calculations of the foe.

So, at half-past two, when sleep was deepest and soundest, over the plain in the rear of the fort, out of the sight of the sentinel who patrolled only right in front of the gate, stole with cautious steps the attacking force. With them they bore a rude ladder. The wall of the fort was only some eight feet high, and this, by means of the ladder, they scaled with the greatest ease, and thus were on the inner side of the inclosure. Now the question was how to gain admission into the house, for the heavy gate which commanded the only entrance was securely closed. Here again the disguised woman served the purpose.

She went to this gate and rapped cautiously on it. The sleepy watcher within thinking it was the sentinel came at once.

"I must see the commandante at once," the spy exclaimed; "the Americans are in camp two miles away."

The officer, knowing that men had been recruited in the town, came to the conclusion that the speaker was some spy who had been sent out to watch for the approach of the invaders, so he opened the gate without a moment's hesitation.

Sleep still hung heavily on his eyelids, and the front of the house being in the shadow he did not notice the dark forms lurking behind the supposed boy; in fact, the first intimation the Mexican had of danger was when a powerful hand grabbed him by the throat, completely choking his utterance, and he was borne over on his back, and a keen knife glittered at his throat.

The noise of the scuffle awoke some of the sleeping soldiers within, and they came in haste from the guard-room to see what was the matter, never for an instant suspecting that the foe was at hand.

Further concealment was useless, so on the air rose the yells of the gold-seekers, interspersed with the sharp reports of their revolvers.

In hot haste the garrison came rushing out, half-dressed some of them; but with one vigorous charge the assailing force drove the Mexicans through the gate, and closed it after them, thus at one single blow capturing the citadel and half a dozen prisoners.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CLEW TO THE MINE.

AND now that the citadel was in possession of the invaders, captured at a single bold stroke, the Americans prepared to hold it against the surprised and angry foe.

Fortune had favored Blake, too, throughout the whole enterprise, for among the prisoners captured were the commandante, one of the captains, and Captain Volcano. All were wounded, too, while the Mexican major, and one of the captains had been killed in the fight, so that the discomfited foe without, although powerful enough in numbers, lacked capable leaders to direct their efforts.

From the roof of the building the miners, with the aid of their revolvers, speedily drove the Mexicans without the walls of the fort, then they made a bold sally from the house and closed the gate. They did not attempt to hold the wall, as Blake well knew that he had not force enough to do that, but the citadel he was confident he could hold against a host.

Everything thus being made secure, Blake proceeded to look after the wounded men.

The commandante had received a bullet in the shoulder—an ugly wound, but not a mortal one; the Mexican captain had been knocked down with the butt of a revolver, and pretty badly bruised, but not otherwise hurt; Volcano, though, seemed to be severely injured, for he was unable to walk, and had to be carried to a couch.

The meeting between Blake and the captive girl was a most joyful one. With trembling voice she called down Heaven's blessing upon

his head, and although she nestled with all the fondness of a loving woman in his arms, into which she sprung when he first appeared, yet tears flowed freely and fast, and it was plain that she was a prey to the deepest apprehension.

Blake knew the girl loved him; her actions had shown that, although with her lips she had never confessed it, and he was now puzzled to account for her conduct, for she seemed more a prey to sorrow than overcome by joy.

"Why do you tremble and weep?" he asked. "You are safe; I will take you from this place, and, if you are willing, we will never part more."

"It cannot be!" she replied, with a fresh burst of tears. "I am married to this wretch. Despite my resistance the ceremony was performed—the ceremony which separates us forever."

"Oh, no; don't worry about that," Blake said, quietly, apparently not at all affected by the intelligence. "Don't be alarmed; all will be well. You are mine, and a dozen marriages with Captain Volcano won't take you from me; the whole thing is a farce and a fraud."

Margerite would have pressed her lover to an explanation, had not one of the gold-seekers come in just then with the intelligence that the smuggler captain was pretty badly wounded and that he desired to see Blake.

Consigning the girl to the care of his follower, the adventurer went at once to where the captain had been carried.

That Volcano was suffering greatly was apparent at the first glance, and Blake, who had had a good deal of experience in this sort of thing, came to the conclusion that the captain was not long for this world.

But that personage was not at all of that opinion, although, as he frankly said, he was suffering the torments of the doomed from the pain of his wound.

The captain desired a private interview with Blake, so the rest withdrew.

"Blake, you know my secret!" exclaimed the captain, abruptly, when the door closed upon the miners.

"Your secret?" remarked the other, evasively.

"Yes, there is no use of your attempting to deceive me. It was you who dressed my wound on board of the sloop when I was in a swoon, and of course you must have discovered what no one else has ever suspected. You saw the marks, too, imprinted on my breast, the same signs which were on the flesh of the Frenchman, and which you doubtless copied, for you must have guessed that it gave a clue to the secret mine."

"Yes, I did copy the inscription."

"And I will translate it for you. The long wavy line represents the river, the short one Carisee creek falling into it. You follow the creek two miles, north-west, then you come to three trees, and those three trees guard the entrance to the mine, which, seemingly, has brought bad luck to every one who ever had anything to do with it. Now you know the secret. And did you come all this way and take all this risk for the sake of this baby-doll girl who is not worthy the love of such a man as you are? I had it in my heart to kill her, and I am sorry that I didn't. But, you don't want her. She is no mate for a man like you. You want a woman as bold as you are and as fearless of all danger. An eagle should not mate with a dove."

"What does the poet say about 'in joining contrasts lieth love's delight'?" responded Blake, quietly.

"It is a foolish passion that you have for this doll; let her go home to her father, and form an alliance with some of the dandies of San Diego; you do not want her. I know a woman who will suit you—a woman who did not believe that there was any such thing as love in this world until she met you—who laughed at the very idea—who believed that she carried a man's heart in her woman's breast into which love would never find an entrance; never did she believe that that heart would thrill under passion's spell, but now she knows the truth, and Juana, daughter of John Carisee, the heiress of the secret mine, is proud to acknowledge that you are her lord and master."

So excited did the speaker become that, with extended arms, a sitting position was assumed, but the effort cost a life, for the crimson current gushed from the mouth, and with a convulsive movement the soul fled from its earthly tenement.

Captain Volcano fell back, dead!

The reader, of course, by this time has guessed the secret:

The smuggler chief was a woman: Captain Volcano was Juana Carisee! Bereft of her father at an early age she had been obliged to fight the world for a living, and the better to wage the struggle she had assumed male attire, and as she had grown to age, her disguise had been so perfect that no one had suspected it. And, too, being strangely unwomanly, not only in her appearance but in her feelings, she had conceived that strange liking for other girls which has been known, in rare cases, to exist in the female breast;—like a man she had wooed and won other women; but the victory was a barren one, and when the love she sought was given, straightway she deserted that object and

transferred her attentions to another. And this strange, unwomanly caprice, as we have seen, was indirectly the cause of Blake's triumph and of her death.

The adventurer turned away with a grave face. Ever since the night on the yacht when compassion had induced him to bind up the wounds of a helpless enemy, he had been in possession of the secret, which, so well had the disguised woman played her part, no one had even suspected.

There was a stormy interview between the Mexican commandante and the adventurer. The commandante raged and threatened, while Blake laughed his words to scorn.

"You are caught in a trap, Señor American," the Mexican cried. "When the morning comes you will be surrounded and not one of you will leave this place alive."

"Bah!" cried Blake, in contempt; "with my force I can hold this house against a thousand men."

"Ah yes, no doubt that you can hold the house, but you cannot stay here forever, and when you attempt to retreat you will be cut off. The house is not provisioned for a siege; three days will exhaust the supplies. My countrymen will draw a line of fire around you and when you attempt to break through you will all be slaughtered in cold blood, for the force against you will be a hundred to one."

"Hardly that," Blake answered, "unless your folks press women and children into service."

"All will fight against you; there is no hope of an escape."

"At any rate I can hold out until my countrymen come to my assistance. You mustn't suppose that I was fool enough to rush bull-headed into this thing without backing. Within two days, if I do not return, there will be a couple of hundred good men here, eager to avenge my death, and as they are pretty rough customers generally, I reckon that when they get through with San Luis there won't be enough left of the town to make a decent bonfire. And as I have made up my mind to hold out until assistance does come, at the very first sign of an attack I will have you and your companions strung up on the roof like onions on a string."

The Mexican turned ghastly pale at this threat, which he nothing doubted Blake would not hesitate to carry out. The commandante knew there were a great many gold-seekers in San Diego; it was quite possible that they would come southward in search of their comrade, and by this time the Mexican had got the idea into his head that his captor was a man of considerable importance.

"Let us not be hasty; let us reason about the matter!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SECRET MINE.

Now this was exactly what Blake wanted; and so he immediately replied that he was quite prepared to listen to anything the other might advance.

The Mexican was smarting over the pain of his defeat, but at the same time the thought that the conquerors might take advantage of their victory and put their prisoners to death, quite obscured the other feeling. He had been informed that Captain Volcano was dead, so he had no more to hope for in that quarter. He hated to give up the alcalde's daughter, but there is an old saying which says, "Needs must when the devil drives" and surely if any one in the world represented the fiend incarnate to the mind of the Mexican just then Blake did, and so, with the fear of death before his eyes, (and life was very sweet indeed to the commandante), he made the proposition, that if Blake and his party would peaceably give up the citadel and retire, they should not be molested during the retreat.

Blake accepted this offer; negotiations were at once opened with the forces outside and the terms arranged. But, as a security against treachery, Blake carried the prisoners with him to the edge of the timber and there released them and they parted apparently quite good friends, although the Mexicans would have given about all that they were worth to have had a chance to wipe out the disgrace of their defeat. But, although Blake rather expected that when the prisoners were released and they joined their friends a pursuit might be attempted, yet he was disappointed. In truth, the drubbing which the Mexicans had received was enough for them and they were not anxious to test the mettle of the gold-seekers again.

On their homeward way Blake and the alcalde's daughter came to an understanding. The affection which they felt for each other was mutual, and now there seemed to be no obstacle in the way except the old alcalde himself. In Blake's opinion the ruler of San Diego was an unscrupulous old rascal, but naturally he hesitated to say so to the girl, who, although her trust in her parent was somewhat shaken by the events which had lately happened, yet she could hardly bring herself to believe that he would attempt to thwart her heart's dearest wishes when he discovered that she was determined upon marrying the adventurer.

So it was settled that she should go straight home, while Blake proceeded upon his quest of the secret mine, for he had determined, now that he had so good a party collected, to proceed at once upon the search. As he reasoned, no time was to be lost, for the secret mine was so near to the main trail to the new diggings that it was really a wonder some party of prospectors had not stumbled upon it.

When they arrived near San Diego, Margerite took a tearful parting with the man she loved, and, being greatly troubled by the thought that perhaps she would never see him again, took a solemn oath that, whether he lived or died she would be faithful to him.

The parting over, Blake pushed forward for the secret mine which had already cost so many lives. The American mused upon the subject as he marched onward. The curse of blood seemed to be upon the hidden treasures. First, it had cost the original discoverer, John Carisee, his life; then the Frenchman, after long years of absence in foreign lands, had returned to possess himself of the treasure and had met his death instead; and the daughter of Carisee, the unsexed woman, the dashing skipper of the Fair Isabel, bold Captain Volcano, in trying to compass the death of the Frenchman, all on account of the mine, had come in contact with him; a feud had ensued, and in that feud Captain Volcano had at last fallen. So far every one who had possessed the secret of the hidden mine had died a violent death, and Blake, strong-minded as he was, got a little superstitious as he thought over the matter. But, he had the gambler's belief in his luck; his star, he thought, was strong and bright enough to shine even through the clouds of blood which obscured the mine.

Onward the party pushed, with all possible speed, and in due course of time came to the junction of the creek and the river; then, following the directions, they went up the creek, in a north-western direction, but as they came to the end of the two miles, and, turning an abrupt bend, caught sight of the three pine trees—the landmark for the mine—to Blake's disgust he beheld a little camp!

The secret mine was a secret mine no longer! A couple of weeks before, a prospecting party had stumbled upon the lode, and at once had gone to work, and as the scent of unearthed gold seems to fly through the air and attract men from afar, even as the carrion upon the desert draws the vultures and the wolves, so other miners had come in, and when Blake made his appearance upon the scene, quite a little settlement had grown up.

Right heartily the miners welcomed the newcomers, and when Blake, in a quiet way, had expressed his disappointment at finding his secret mine a secret no longer, they had responded that there was plenty for all, and altogether too much for one man.

The strike was a rich one, and all of Blake's party decided to settle down there. The curse which had seemingly hung over the mine was removed at last, the adventurer thought. The miners had flocked to the spot in such numbers as to break the spell; but there was another deed of blood yet to be charged to the secret mine.

In the darkness of the night an assassin form had crept into the camp and attempted to murder Blake, but a vagabond cur which had followed some of the miners, and was prowling around the camp, gave the alarm. The man, foiled in his purpose, attempted to escape but at once became the target for the aroused miners' bullets, and one well-aimed shot settled the assassin's account for this world.

The moon was nearly at its full and by its light the man was recognized, for all of the miners had come from San Diego, and the old white-haired conjurer, Cajo, the supposed Indian, was a well-known character of the town.

They examined him, after he had fallen, to see if he was mortally wounded, and a strange discovery was made. The Indian was a white man, stone-dead, for the bullet had pierced his heart. On his breast the mystic signs relating to the mine were engraved, and a name besides—John Carisee!

To Blake who knew the story of the mine the truth was at once apparent. The Frenchman had not killed Carisee, in the struggle between them, as he had imagined; Carisee had recovered, but, crazed by his wounds, had wandered off. In time he partially recovered but never regained the full use of his senses; he had tracked the adventurer clear from the Mexican town and had endeavored to avenge the death of Captain Volcano but Blake's lucky star was in the ascendant and he had escaped.

Our tale is told now and but little more needs to be said. Margerite, the alcalde's daughter, waits in San Diego for her lover to claim her, and the old official, though chafing at the alliance, dares not say nay.

With the death of Captain Volcano the smugglers almost ceased operations, for, lacking his bold heart and active brain, they could not hope to succeed; and then, too, they never fully recovered from the dreadful blow inflicted upon them by the champion of the Red Revolvers.

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